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# **Gender and ‘active citizenship’ in the context of international development intervention in Kyrgyzstan**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in Development Studies

2014

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## **Abstract:**

Working within a theoretical framework that draws on feminist critiques of how concepts of gender equality, civil society, activism, and citizenship have been instrumentalised within 'development', this thesis considers the evolution of donor-funded, gender-focused development policy and programme in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, since the country became independent in 1991, and how this has shaped what it means to be involved in 'gender activism' (activities that in some way promote a positive shift in gender relations). I begin by considering how Soviet equalities policy, the unwritten Soviet social contract, and the realities of everyday Soviet life, as well as the impacts of post-independence economic and political transition, created particular understandings of citizenship, gender equality, and women's rights in Kyrgyzstan. Foreign donors arriving into this environment in the 1990s facilitated the growth of the country's NGO sector in the interests of building 'civil society' (seen as integral to the process of democratisation and to delivering aid), and brought with them alternative understandings of these concepts, which those active in NGOs were expected to adopt. I explore how women and men active in this sector negotiate, contest, and accommodate these competing agendas, as well as the power relations that have developed within the gender-focused NGO sector in particular. The findings are based on qualitative research (in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and observation of three case study groups), carried out between July 2009 and April 2010 in Bishkek. I argue that the representation of civil society and the gender-focused NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan as donor-led and out of touch with wider society that has come to dominate the literature on development in this region masks complex processes of contestation and negotiation, as well as the deeply held commitments of those active within it to 'helping' others and participating in bringing about progressive social change.

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# 1. Introduction

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In the early 1990s, the 'developing world' suddenly expanded. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought into being a swathe of newly independent countries (several of which had not existed before as sovereign entities), many of whose populations were abruptly plunged into poverty, with the collapse of the command economy and the comprehensive social welfare system that had made up the Soviet state. Responding to this, international development agencies and organisations began to expand their programmes into the countries of the former Soviet Union, finding themselves working in environments that were quite different from many parts of the rest of the developing world, in terms, for instance, of people's perceptions of poverty and wellbeing, as well as their expectations in regard to the state and what it should or should not be providing to its citizens. One of these countries was the Kyrgyz Republic.<sup>1</sup>

The Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (hereafter Kyrgyz SSR) had been one of the poorest republics within the USSR, heavily reliant on subsidies from Moscow. While living standards were lower here than in some other parts of the USSR, poverty was 'camouflaged' by an extensive social protection system (Bauer et al. 1997, p. 8), with citizens in the Kyrgyz SSR enjoying the same rights to free (and comprehensive) education and healthcare, and heavily subsidised housing, childcare, and leisure facilities as those living in wealthier republics. When the country became independent (for the first time) in 1991, its population experienced the sudden and severe contraction of the state and its capacity to ensure the social and economic rights of its citizens, resulting both from the withdrawal of subsidies from Moscow and the collapse of the inter-Union demand economy. This was exacerbated by economic structural reform in the early 1990s, as Kyrgyzstan became one of the first former-Soviet countries to introduce market reforms (Anderson 1999; Baschieri & Falkingham 2006). This led to widespread poverty and unemployment,<sup>2</sup> and had the effect of drastically reducing women's employment opportunities in particular (with the closure of state institutions and industries), and removing the support infrastructure that had enabled women to work outside the home (crèches, kindergartens, and after-school clubs) (Bauer et al. 1997; Corcoran-Nantes 2005).

Given Kyrgyzstan's status as a low-income country and its poverty relative to other countries in the region, as Shreeves notes, the country was initially deemed to be in need of what she calls 'classical'

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<sup>1</sup> The country's official name is the Kyrgyz Republic; however, it is also widely referred to as Kyrgyzstan, both inside the country and at the regional and international level. Reflecting this, I use the two names interchangeably throughout this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Wages fell by 30% in 1992, 51.5% in 1993, and 25.8% in 1994; at the same time, inflation reached 280% in 1994 (Moghadam 2000, p.32); by the end of 1995, women accounted for 53.6% of people registered as unemployed (Bauer et al. 1997, p.9).

development interventions, focussing on basic infrastructure and human and social development (Shreeves 2002, n. 5). However, attention soon shifted to the perceived need to support the country in its 'transition' to democracy and capitalism (assumed to be mutually reliant). As such, when international development organisations and donors began arriving in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s, they brought with them new ideas of gender equality, civil society, social welfare, and the relationship between the new, 'active citizen' and the state, all believed integral to the successful establishment of democracy in the country (Mandel 2002; ACSSC 2006b; Schulte 2008a). 'The donors' also brought the blueprint for the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that would help to cement these new values and implement projects to provide a safety net of sorts for those not benefitting from the new social and economic order (Giffen et al. 2005; ACSSC 2006b). The provision of training programmes and other forms of support, the availability of generous funding for project implementation, and the salaries that came with project funding resulted in the establishment of a large number of NGOs in the 1990s. As the 1990s progressed, funding for organisations working on gender equality assumed increasing importance, with work on gender-based violence particularly evident, reflecting the growing influence of the gender and development (GAD) agenda within mainstream development thinking (Bauer et al. 1997; Molyneux & Razavi 2006; Marchand 2009).

In addition to the importation of the NGO model, development work in Kyrgyzstan and neighbouring countries in the 1990s relied heavily on blueprints of projects and programmes implemented elsewhere, given that donors and international agencies really had no idea as to the environment they were entering. But while Kyrgyzstan was a very poor country in the 1990s (and remains so), many of the basic indicators used to measure human development would have presented a very different picture, with for instance virtually universal school attendance and completion at primary and secondary level,<sup>3</sup> widespread provision of healthcare facilities and high numbers of hospital births, high levels of female labour-force participation (despite the collapse), and a high level of expectation of state provision of services. As an account of the development of 'civil society' in Kyrgyzstan published locally by the Association of Civil Society Support Centers (ACSSC) notes, this lack of understanding or appreciation for the local context led to some pretty poorly designed development interventions (ACSSC 2006b). In one example, in a study undertaken in the Kyrgyz Republic in the early 1990s, Howell found that interventions designed to relieve the effects of food shortages and sudden unemployment had not taken into account existing patterns of securing food and basic goods in times of shortage (which relied on reciprocal friendship and work networks), or people's lack of familiarity with dealing with markets and trade (Howell 1996). Elsewhere, one of my

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<sup>3</sup> To this day, the sign of having successfully received an education in Kyrgyzstan is not completion of primary or even secondary school, but the attainment of a university degree or diploma of specialised vocational training.

research respondents recalled one of her organisation's early projects (implemented in the late 1990s), that she felt had been poorly designed:

You start to understand that it is not simple.... ... you start to understand that there are many different aspects that you have to bear in mind when you [address these issues]. Earlier, [these weren't considered]. With this family-planning programme, [...] That programme in particular [and the way it was implemented], it wasn't that beneficial for our society. And it wasn't [explained] to the society. And also in general, as it were, it wasn't appropriate for our society... (interview with a consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

To a certain extent, this 'gap' in terms of development-focused, or development-relevant knowledge about Kyrgyzstan and the wider Central Asian region has narrowed, thanks mainly to the large amount of 'grey' research literature produced by local and international NGOs and development agencies. However, this body of 'grey' research inevitably has its limitations.

In the first place, it has been geared towards meeting the information needs of the donor agencies and international NGOs active in the region (Ibraeva 2011; Kandiyoti 2011), and has, at times, relied on mass surveys filled with categories and questions that may have been formulated without any '... in-depth understanding of the local meanings attached to [those] categories [meaning that] survey findings can be of limited utility, and may even be quite misleading' (Kandiyoti 1999, p. 500). This has particularly been the case with donor-focused research relating to gender issues, and to women, who have for the most part been presented as a homogenous, undifferentiated, voiceless group of 'victims of the transition' (see for example Asian Development Bank 2005), with little account given to the very different experiences of particular groups of women within the societies of the Central Asian republics, or to the way that gender roles and relations are shaping their life choices and opportunities. Second, research funded by donors is inevitably also framed within the neo-liberal model in which development assistance continues to be offered in Kyrgyzstan (discussed in greater detail in chapters 2 and 4), with little attempt made to interrogate and problematise that model, or the assumptions within it regarding gender, civil society, and citizenship, or development and the role of NGOs. Finally, as one of my respondents argued, the quality of this research has also been inconsistent:

There has never been any base research into what it means to be a woman in the Kyrgyz Republic, it's thought that that is not needed, so we only get research that looks at women in a very instrumentalised way, like how to increase women's productivity. A few years ago [two development agencies] commissioned some research on masculinities, but it was

rubbish, a lot of money was wasted for nothing (interview with NGO leader and academic, female, mid 40s, 28 October 2009).<sup>4</sup>

This research is now beginning to overlap with the growing body of ethnographic and empirical research (Poujol 2011), much of which finds its way into the main area studies journal for the region, *Central Asian Survey*. This is particularly the case for Kyrgyzstan (where social scientists and anthropologists, as well as local and international organisations have far greater freedom and opportunity to engage in research activities than is possible in the other Central Asian countries); analysis of this recent literature relating to development gender, activism and civil society in the region forms part of this study, as does the growing body of literature considering gender relations in Central Asia during and since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

However, one area in regard to development that remains under-researched in both development agency-driven 'grey' research and the academic research on this region are the experiences and perspectives of those who have become the main implementers of development programmes in Kyrgyzstan; namely people working and active within Kyrgyzstani NGOs. In particular, there has been little attention given to those working in the field of (what is currently labelled<sup>5</sup>) gender equality and women's rights. It is this group of people who are the subjects of this research project.

## Research outline

This thesis approaches the topic of gender and activism in present-day Kyrgyzstan within the framework of a feminist critical assessment of development policy and programme interventions undertaken by international donors active in the Kyrgyz Republic with a view to 'building' civil society and promoting 'women's rights and gender equality' as means of facilitating democratic transition. In considering the evolution and current reality of what I term the 'gender-focused' NGO sector in the Kyrgyz Republic, I use a critical approach seeks to move beyond an account of whether and how civil society has been 'established' in Kyrgyzstan, and whether and how gender as a development concern has been successfully mainstreamed into development programmes here and in the wider region. Rather, I seek to interrogate the very grounds on which civil society (and 'active citizenship' within it) and gender have been used as development 'tools' in this context, and how these concepts have interacted with local realities and histories. As Constantine (2007) argues, gender is a profoundly important analytical concept in assessing social change in the wider Central Asian region. I would argue that this is also the case in regard to considering the way 'development'

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<sup>4</sup> Kandiyoti (1999; 2011) has also argued that this research model has led to significant reduction in the capacity of local research institutes and universities to produce their own research (as staff moonlight for better paid NGO contracts on the side, or leave altogether).

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 2 for a full discussion of the evolution of work on gender issues in development.

has been implemented in Kyrgyzstan. In particular, I draw on: the idea of ‘gender myths’ that have emerged in development to provide what are now taken for granted explanations for women’s ongoing inequality and for their prominent role in civic activism (Cornwall et. al., eds., 2008); critical assessments of the way that theories of civil society have been stripped of their political and conceptual tensions and ‘operationalised’ in development in the form of providing support to NGOs (Chandhoke 2007; Whaites 1996; Whaites 1998), and; an assessment of the way that feminist and women’s activism has been instrumentalised both by institutional development policy makers (see, for instance, HIVOS 2006) *and* by critical development and feminist scholars (for instance, Alvarez 1999; Mandel 2002). This theoretical framework is expanded upon in the next chapter.

The central research questions are:

- How have ‘civil society’, ‘active citizenship’, and ‘gender’ been instrumentalised in the work of international development programmes in Kyrgyzstan?
- How have women and men involved as volunteers and employees in gender-focused NGOs experienced the instrumentalisation of these theoretical concepts? How have they engaged with, negotiated, and contested the agendas of the development organisations that support their work at the individual and organisational level?
- How have these processes of negotiation and contestation shaped power relations between and within gender-focused NGOs?
- What does it mean to be an activist working towards gender equality in the Kyrgyz Republic?

I adopt an approach that seeks to situate my respondents’ reflections on civil society and on their work on gender equality within critical engagements with what ‘civil society’ has come to mean in development, and with the way that women, and later gender, have been incorporated into development policy and programmes (chapters 2 and 4). In the chapter dealing with relations between NGOs, I draw on a framework of competing hierarchies (in relation to age, language, and access to donor organisations) that emerged from my own analysis of the interview and observational data that I collected, as well as the small but growing body of literature produced in Kyrgyzstan itself on civil society and the NGO sector. In the remaining two substantive chapters, I use in particular theories of ‘active citizenship’ (Dagnino 2007; Kabeer 2005a; Cornwall & Gaventa 2001 and others) and Alvarez’s (1999) idea of the ‘activist-professional’ to analyse my respondents’ own understandings of activism and what it meant to them. I argue that the representation of civil society and the gender-focused NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan as donor-led and out of touch with the wider society that has come to dominate the literature on development in this region masks

complex processes of contestation and negotiation, as well as the deeply held commitments of those active within it to ‘helping’ others and participating in bringing about progressive social change.

In regard to the particular area of development policy that this thesis seeks to investigate, namely the emergence and development of a donor-sponsored ‘civil society’ in Kyrgyzstan, and the ‘active citizens’ within it, Kabeer has argued that debates around what constitutes citizenship in both the global North and the South are taking place in an ‘empirical void’ (2005b, p. 1); I would argue that this is even more the case in the republics of the former Soviet Union, most of which do not fit comfortably within this ‘North/South’ binary and where, following the collapse of the USSR, there has been a profound rupture in the relationship between the individual and the state (see Humphrey 1999; Schulte 2008a; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Bauer et al. 1997). There continues to be a lack of ethnographic data on ‘lived reality’ in Central Asia (Kuehnast 1997; Kandiyoti 1999), relating to the research questions addressed in this thesis or otherwise, with Soviet ethnographic accounts of the region now dated and considered ideologically unsound, as well as simplistic in their reduction of ‘the local’ in Central Asia to ‘custom, tradition and ethnicity’ (Kandiyoti 2002b, p. 252). At the same time, within development studies at the global level, beyond an acknowledgement that women dominate NGO sectors in many national contexts, there has been little in-depth investigation into the professional motivations, choices, and experiences of such women (Clark & Michuki 2009). This research, using a consciously feminist analysis as its main frame of reference, contributes towards a more nuanced, micro-level ethnographic picture of the way that development interventions have impacted on society in the Kyrgyz Republic, as well as allowing the ‘previously untold stories’ (DeVault & Gross 2007, p. 173) of a particular group of women (and some men) deeply involved in these interventions to be heard.

## **Research context**

### **Development and political context at the time of research**

As of July 2009 – April 2010, when the field research for this PhD was carried out, Kyrgyzstan remained the second poorest country in Central Asia and the former Soviet Union, with few natural resources (or at least, few that have been effectively exploited), growing inequality between rich and poor, between 40 and 50% of the population living below the official national poverty level, and high levels of corruption (Anderson 1999; Cokgezen 2004; DFID 2004; Asian Development Bank 2008). This is despite some improvement since 2000 on the dire economic conditions and widespread poverty of the 1990s, particularly in reducing the number of people living in extreme poverty (Asian Development Bank 2008). Classed as a low-income country and with a Human Development Index

(HDI) ranking of 109 for 2010<sup>6</sup> (out of 169 countries with data), it remains heavily dependent on donor aid and has a high debt burden (DFID 2004; World Bank 2007). Kyrgyzstan is also a country where the institutions of the international development industry have permeated to a profound extent, from the effective 'sponsorship' of the official website of the Kyrgyz Government by the Swiss Development Agency (see Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2010), to the plaques displayed in many villages recording the implementation of infrastructure and training projects funded by international development organisations.<sup>7</sup> That said, the Kyrgyz Republic has witnessed the withdrawal of several donors in the past few years (for instance, the Dutch human rights fund HIVOS, and SIDA, the Swedish development agency), mainly as a result of lack of progress made (and increasing restrictions on activities) in neighbouring countries and the ensuing decision to close regional programmes. As discussed in chapter 5, the number of local NGOs that are actually in operation has also significantly declined, mainly as a result of failure to secure on-going funding.

Reliance on hydroelectric power and imported gas and oil for both industrial output and domestic heating and electricity provision makes the country extremely vulnerable to the effects of abnormal weather conditions, as well as fluctuations in fuel prices: droughts in 2007-8 reduced the amount of water available for hydroelectric power, leading to frequent power cuts and the interruption of heating provision throughout the winter, as well as a significant reduction in industrial and agricultural output. This combined with a global rise in food prices led to widespread food insecurity that winter (UNDP 2009). Recent years have also seen high levels of both male and female migration to Russia and Kazakhstan, and the economy is heavily reliant on migrant remittances at both household and national level; as a consequence, the downturn in the economies of both Russia and Kazakhstan following the global economic crisis in 2008-2009, as well as more recent changes in migration regulations in Russia are continuing to have a direct impact on the wellbeing of many Kyrgyzstani households (UNDP 2009; Rickleton 2011). Poverty is particularly acute in the southern part of the country, which is predominantly rural and also more overtly religious, and where there is a large Uzbek minority (Bauer et al. 1997; Anderson 1999), exacerbating the long-existing division between the north and the south (see Roy 2005; Dave 2004; Anderson 1999).

On the political front, while the country has not followed the path to autocracy taken by its neighbours Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, the 'transition to democracy' has been no less smooth, or definite, with two 'revolutions' (in 2005 and 2010) and on-going political instability. In regard to the 2005 'revolution', at the time, the ouster of President Askar Akaev was widely represented as

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<sup>6</sup> Kyrgyzstan's score under the HDI for 2012 was 0.622, ranked at 125 out of 187 countries with comparable data (UNDP n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> Personal observation. See Dave (2004) for more on this.

resulting from a popular uprising in March 2005 (following contested presidential elections), in which civil society groups and youth movements were taken to have played a central role. Links were made between this ‘Tulip Revolution’ and other ‘colour revolutions’ that had recently occurred in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004). Since then, the role of civil society in Akaev’s removal from power has come to be widely disputed (along with the idea that this constituted a popular uprising at all) (Kulikova & Perlmutter 2007), with Radnitz’s (2010) work on elite mobilisation and ‘subversive clientalism’ becoming particularly influential as explanations for what was effectively a transfer of power from one political elite to another (see Radnitz 2010, and Cummings 2012). That notwithstanding, several of my respondents did talk about the role that they saw ‘civil society’ as having played in Akaev’s ouster, pointing to this as having been a time when civil society groups more active, and had more influence, than they did at the time of this research (see chapter 4).

At the time this research was undertaken, then president Kurmanbek Bakiyev (who came to power following the ouster of Akaev in 2005), was showing increasing signs of authoritarianism, with clampdowns on media freedom and the activities of civil society organisations, and the consolidation of one-party rule (Human Rights Watch 2006). As my field research was drawing to a close, in early April 2010 Bakiyev was himself ousted in events that were far more violent (on the side of those doing the uprising, as well as the government response) than those in 2005. The ouster is understood to have been the result of the culmination of growing dissatisfaction with the president’s increasing authoritarianism, his appointment of his sons and other relatives to key government positions, overt corruption, and rising food and utilities prices (see International Crisis Group 2010a; Reeves 2010a; Cummings 2012). As with the ouster of Akaev in 2005, elite mobilisation and power struggles between the various political elites no doubt played a more significant role in Bakiyev’s removal from power than popular discontent (although from my own observations, popular discontent did appear to be running very high). In addition, ‘civil society’ involvement in the events leading up to Bakiyev’s resignation appeared to be minimal; as representatives of ‘civil society’, those of my research respondents with whom I was able to make contact in April 2010 firmly distanced themselves from the demonstrations that were going on, and expressed considerable cynicism towards the opposition politicians who had assumed leadership.<sup>8</sup>

An interim government took over immediately following the April events, headed by veteran opposition politician and former diplomat Roza Otunbayeva, Central Asia’s first female head of state, who was confirmed as interim president by referendum in July 2010; the referendum also confirmed

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<sup>8</sup> Interviews carried out on 12 April 2010 with five members of the LGBT group (case study 3), on 13 April with an employee of the feminist umbrella organisation (case study 2), and on 21 April with the independent gender expert (previously interviewed on 19 October 2009).



acceptance of a new constitution, which significantly reduced the executive powers of the president, and introduced a form of parliamentary democracy. In the period between the uprising and the referendum, violence erupted in the southern city of Osh, resulting in nearly 200 deaths, according to official figures, and the displacement of up to 375,000 people (UN Central Emergency Response Fund 2010). While this violence has been typically – and simplistically – denoted as resulting from ‘ethnic’ conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, as many commentators have argued, many other factors, including struggle for political control over the city, the political vacuum left after the ouster of Bakiyev, conflict over access to and control over resources, and the return of large numbers of labour migrants from Russia as a result of worsening economic conditions in that country, need to be taken into account to fully understand what happened in June 2010.<sup>9</sup>

### **A note on ethnicity, and ‘Central Asian women’**

The borders that the Kyrgyz Republic recognizes today were not the result of an organic affiliation of ethnic groups. Instead, Central Asia, as it is now configured, was a strategic effort by the Soviets to divide the Central Asian people to contain what they perceived as a threat of pan-Turkism and pan-Islam (Bauer et al. 1997, p. 6).

As the statement above indicates, the area encompassed by the Kyrgyz SSR and subsequently the present-day Kyrgyz Republic is not just home to the Kyrgyz ethnic group. When the borders were drawn up in the 1930s, the population who found themselves within them were not just ethnic Kyrgyz (the ‘titular group’), but also Uzbek, Russian, Ukrainian, Tartar, Dungan (ethnic Chinese Muslims), and Uighur, as well as many other small groups. Subsequent waves of deportation during World War II brought ethnic German, Korean, and Chechen minorities, deported to Central Asia from European Russia and the Russian Far East by Stalin on the grounds that they might side with the Germans or Japanese. In addition, throughout the Soviet period, Russians and other Europeans were encouraged to migrate to all the Central Asian republics from other parts of the Soviet Union (see Landau & Kellner-Heinkele 2001).

In the Tsarist Imperial and early Soviet periods, there was also considerable variation in which name was given to which ethnic group in the region, with for instance ‘Kyrgyz’ used to denote Kazakhs until the 1930s, while Kyrgyz were known as ‘Kara-Kyrgyz’ (‘Black Kyrgyz’) (Anderson 1999, p. 9; Roy 2005, chap. 4). Further, as noted by many commentators, Soviet nationalities policy (particularly from the 1950s onwards), focused as it was on coding and ‘documenting the “ethnogenesis”, territorial rootedness, and genetic purity of each Central Asian nation’ (Edgar 2007, p. 583), led to an

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<sup>9</sup> Space does not permit a thorough assessment of what happened in Osh and why, but see International Crisis Group (2010b), Patten (2010), Reeves (2010a; 2010b), McGlinchey (2011), and Cummings (2012) for some analysis. As will be appreciated, the interpretation of the Osh events has been the focus of considerable contestation, not least following the Kyrgyzstani parliament’s rejection of the findings of an international investigation into the violence (see Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2011a).

increasingly 'fixed' view of national identity and the practices and customs that were believed to constitute that identity (Zaslavsky 1994; Roy 2005; Edgar 2007; Khalid 2007; McBrien 2009; Jones Luong 2004). For instance, Islam and Islamic practices came to be seen as a signifier of cultural and national identity for the dominant ethnic groups in the Central Asian republics, rather than of faith: 'Muslim identity became intrinsically tied up with national identity and became romantically celebrated as "culture". To be Kyrgyz, or Uzbek or Kazak was to be Muslim' (McBrien 2009, p. 5131). In his book *The New Central Asia: the Creation of Nations*, Roy even goes so far as to say that the ethnic identities ascribed to those living in the region were effectively invented (Roy 2005, chap. 4). Cummings, however, reviewing the pertinent literature, notes arguments put forward that the delineation of national identities and corresponding titular republics *did* in fact reflect existing understandings of selfhood (Cummings 2012, citing Edgar 2004 and Haugen 2003, among others).

Whatever the origins of the markers of national identity ascribed to the different ethnic groups living in the Kyrgyz SSR and beyond, from the mid-1930s onwards, people in the Soviet Union were locked into 'ethnic designations', with the 'overall effect of making ethnic belonging the single most important determinant of life options' (Kandiyoti 2007, p. 606; Suny 2009). At the same time, though, given that in Central Asia, they had been codified through Soviet administration, these 'ethnic designations' were inseparable from the notion of 'Sovietness'. As Cummings argues, 'the Soviet and the national were created and ... experienced simultaneously' (Cummings 2012, p. 44), while McBrien (2009) recounts that people living in the Central Asian republics saw no contradiction in identifying as both Soviet *and* Kyrgyz (Kazakh, Tatar, Uighur, etc.). When the Soviet Union collapsed, the 'created nations' in Central Asia did not collapse into tribal divisions and the 'violent rejection of the Soviet legacy in the form of nationalism and ethnic identity', as some Sovietologists had argued would happen (Jones Luong 2004, p. 6).

Given this background, it is rather surprising that so few commentators writing on this region (both academic and development policy-focused researchers) explain exactly who they are talking about when they speak of 'Kyrgyz' or 'Central Asian women'; namely whether they mean women who belong to the titular ethnic groups of the five Central Asian republics, or whether they are referring to *all* women residing in the region.<sup>10</sup> For as Kuehnast (1997, p. 32) states, there is no 'unified Kyrgyz woman' (and even less so a 'unified *Central Asian*' woman), whether one is talking about women who are ethnic Kyrgyz, or women who are citizens of Kyrgyzstan. To assume that there is, is to

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<sup>10</sup> Examples of this lack of clarity include Corcoran-Nantes (2005), Ishkanian (2003), Kandiyoti (2007), and Constantine (2007). Bauer et al. (1997), Kuehnast (1997), McBrien (2006), and McBrien (2009) are notable exceptions. In the cases of Corcoran-Nantes (2005), Constantine (2007), and Kandiyoti (2007) this is very surprising, given that all three go out of their way to state that the experiences of women from different parts of Central Asia cannot be reduced to one, unified 'Central Asian woman', and yet then go on to use the label themselves.

ignore the way that a myriad of different intersecting factors, including age, sexuality, (dis)ability, level of education, language, and physical location, as well as ethnicity and gender, shape experience and perspective (see Pillow & Mayo 2007). It also ignores the way that different groups of women have been positioned in the region in terms of status, visibility, voice, and access to opportunity, and pays little attention to the way that women's national identities have been instrumentalised to represent allegedly opposing forces. For instance, the Soviet Russian women bringing 'civilisation' to Central Asia through marrying 'native' men, representing a positive force against the 'backwardness' of 'native' women (Edgar 2007), or the way that so many of my respondents recounted that life was so much better for women in Kyrgyzstan than in neighbouring countries, even as they told me of facing or observing overt gender-discrimination and abuse.

This was something that I became very aware of during the course of my research, given that a significant proportion of my respondents (as well as the women I interacted with through other research activities) were not ethnic Kyrgyz.<sup>11</sup> In addition, some identified as lesbian, bisexual or transgender, one was disabled, and one was openly HIV positive. When the topic came up during interviews, all professed strong association with 'Kyrgyzstan', both as an idea and as a bounded geographical space. And yet these perspectives do not appear to be reflected in the writing on the region, in terms of the historical context, or present-day realities. A conscious awareness of the intersectional nature of these women's lived realities has shaped my research.

## Methodology

From the outset of this research project, I was committed to using ethnographic and qualitative research methods to collect my data. I agree with Hesse-Biber et al. (2004) that research methods are themselves politically neutral tools that can be used by anyone, regardless of their epistemological approach, and hence, that there is nothing inherently more 'feminist' about qualitative methods. However, I felt that given my interest in investigating individual women's (and in the event, some men's) perceptions of their own activism, work in the NGO sector, and ideas such as 'civil society' and 'citizenship', in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interviews would be the most appropriate means of gathering research material, while spending time 'embedded' within local NGOs as a volunteer would allow me to achieve an insight into the way these groups operated and interacted that would not be possible from just considering them from outside. As such, for this project I chose to use a mixture of in-depth interviews and observation of three case study groups to collect data.

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<sup>11</sup> My respondents included people who self-identified as ethnic Korean, Russian, German, and Tatar, as well as Kyrgyz.

## Selecting research respondents

This research focuses on a section of the population – women (and some men) working and active in civil society as employees or volunteers within NGOs – who, I argue, occupy a particularly significant position within Kyrgyzstani society, active as they are within the one sphere of public influence that is dominated by women, and as implementers of macro-level donor-determined development policy at the local level. They are also a professional group who have received much negative attention in the literature on civil society in Central Asia, dismissed as an alienated and out of touch elite (see for example Mandel 2002). My desire to engage with this group had two main rationales. First, I assumed that through their work, members of this group would have been exposed to externally crafted development agendas and the assumptions regarding gender, civil society, activism, and citizenship that have accompanied them. In the event, the way that my respondents interacted with these ideas was far more complex than a straightforward adoption (or rejection) of them, as is discussed in detail in later parts of this thesis. Second, I wished to critique the representation of this ‘NGO elite’ as a stable, fixed category, through exploring what motivates such women to become active – and remain active – in the NGO sector. This critique forms the framework of the discussion in chapters 6 and 7 of the thesis.

I had intended to limit my research respondents to people working or volunteering at my three case study groups. However, initially, this did not prove to be a very effective way of securing interviews, as at my first case study group (the women’s crisis centre), few people were (initially) willing to be interviewed (as discussed below). As I noted in my field notes, while I was at first despondent about this, and felt that this meant that overall, the project was ‘not working’, I then decided to take a different approach:

[This] just means I need to be more creative about finding people to interview, and that I need to approach a lot more potential interviewees. That will give me a much wider range of viewpoints, which can only be a good thing, and also reduce the pressure that I am feeling over the case studies and ‘making them work’, as I can treat them as organisational profiles in their own right, rather than as a means to an end; which means they’ll probably work much better (field notes, 8 September 2009).

In the end, the bulk of my in-depth interviews were with people (11 out of 16) associated with one of my three case study groups, either through work or volunteering, or because they worked with a group that was a member organisation of my second case study group, the feminist umbrella organisation. The remainder of my interviewees (both in-depth and background) were identified either thanks to staff at the Social Research Center at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) (where I was based as a visiting research fellow), who kindly introduced me or put me in touch with several respondents, through approaching people at events and seminars, or through people

working at one of the three case study groups, who put me in touch with others outside the group who they thought would be willing to be interviewed.

### **Conducting interviews**

In the event, I carried out 27 interviews, including five interviews with male respondents, and two group interviews.<sup>12</sup> Of these interviews, eight respondents worked for international development organisations in Bishkek (of which three were expatriates), two were academics, and one was an independent gender consultant; the remaining respondents all worked or volunteered for local NGOs.

I recorded 16 of the interviews, all of which were in-depth interviews and all of which were conducted with 'local' activists working or volunteering in local NGOs or international organisations. For these, I used a set of prompt questions generated from my research interests and my reading of the available literature on civil society and development in Kyrgyzstan. During my first few interviews, I stuck rigidly to a written list of prompt questions, which covered the following themes:

- Basic information on age, occupation, and how long the respondent had been working for or active in an NGO (all identifying information was later anonymised at the transcription stage)
- How the respondent came to be working in a gender-focused NGO
- The importance and contribution of the respondent's / NGO's work
- What the respondent saw as significant gender issues in Kyrgyzstan
- Relations with other NGOs
- Relations between NGOs and the state
- Relations between NGOs and donors
- How the respondent understood (and related to) the concepts of citizenship, civil society, and activism
- The respondent's memories of the late Soviet period and the 'transition' period following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

However, as I conducted more interviews, and became more confident (particularly after one occasion where I was put 'on the spot' and had to conduct an interview with no notes at all), I ended up abandoning this written list (while continuing to use some of the questions that had been on it), at which point I felt the quality of my interviews and the richness of the material produced began to improve.

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<sup>12</sup> These group interviews were recorded, but I have not used the data in this thesis.

Inevitably, in many instances, conversations during these recorded interviews often developed in interesting and unexpected directions, generating new research questions that I then went on to use in subsequent interviews. For instance, as discussed in chapter 6, I had not intended to ask any direct questions on feminism, and whether or not my respondents identified as ‘feminist’, however this theme emerged ‘organically’ in one of my first in-depth interviews, and I went on to include a question on whether the respondent saw herself as a feminist in many of my subsequent interviews. Questions on activism and what it meant to the respondent generated far more lively and engaged responses than questions on citizenship (which had been the original, main focus of my research plan), and so these came to form a core part of each interview. In addition, in answers to my questions on relations between NGOs, issues of generational conflict<sup>13</sup> and of tension regarding who was included and who was excluded in the ‘women’s movement’ in Kyrgyzstan emerged forcefully in some of my early interviews (both in-depth and background), prompting me to ask questions specifically on these topics in later interviews. I transcribed the recorded interviews myself, as I did not have the funds to pay for transcription, and did not have access to transcription software (and was also unfamiliar with such software). All interviews took place either at the flat where I was living, at the respondent’s home, or at their place of work.

Recorded interviews conducted in Russian (14 in total) were transcribed straight into English, in the interests of saving time. Using a process suggested in Gibbs (2007), on completion of each interview transcript I then sat and immediately wrote out my initial impression of the interview, noting in particular the dominant themes and issues that had emerged in the interview. I then used these to generate a list of codes, for each of which I established a separate ‘code memo’ document. Generating codes from the interview data (rather than working with a list of pre-determined codes) allowed me to capture issues and patterns in regard to the way that my respondents reacted to different questions that might otherwise have been missed. Using a hard copy of each interview transcript, I then used highlighters to code excerpts and quotations (adding to the list of codes as I went along), later copying and pasting this material into the relevant code memo. This meant that when it came to writing up the data, the interview material was already organised thematically, and I could draw upon it easily.

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<sup>13</sup> In my original research plan, I had intended to use generation as a framework for looking at issues of citizenship in Kyrgyzstan, through interviewing younger women and then their older female relatives. However, I decided to abandon this after hearing some of my research respondents, and new friends and acquaintances, talk about the extent to which generational conflict (particularly between young, married women and their mothers-in-law, but also between unmarried women and their parents and grandparents) dominated relationships within their families. I decided that trying to interview younger and older women who were directly related would not be a good idea, as it might limit what my younger respondents were prepared to say to me during our interviews, knowing that I then intended to go on to interview their mothers (or their mothers’ friends). In addition, I realised that gender and generational conflict within families was such a big issue that bringing this into my research would likely open up a whole new area of investigation.

The remaining 11 interviews were shorter, semi-structured background interviews with key informants ('local' and expatriate) familiar with the NGO sector in Bishkek (including gender advisors working independently and for international or national NGOs, expatriates working in development organisations, and academics at AUCA),<sup>14</sup> and covered the condition of civil society in Kyrgyzstan, relations between different NGOs (including between gender-focused NGOs and non-gender focused NGOs), and between NGOs and the state, and NGOs and donors. In the end, none of these interviews were recorded, usually because the respondent did not want to be recorded, or in some cases because the interview took place in a location that was unsuitable for recording because there was too much noise (e.g., a café). In such cases, I took notes (in English) during the interview.

### **Case studies**

In addition to conducting semi-structured interviews with activists within 'civil society' in Kyrgyzstan, and those familiar with the NGO sector, I also spent an extended period of time involved with three different gender-focused NGOs, all of whom were identified by civil society and gender experts as particularly active groups. At the end of each day spent with one of my case study groups, I would write up comprehensive field notes recording my observations.

Feminist scholars undertaking research on feminist and / or gender-focused activism have often chosen case studies of individual gender-focused groups over large scale surveys. In some cases, researchers have worked with a single group (see for example Hemment 2007; O'Reilly 2014), while others have chosen to look at two or more case study groups in comparison (e.g. Coyle 2003; Salmenniemi 2008; Helms 2014). Hemment (2007) talks of the potential of participant observation within a case study to yield insight into the 'nitty gritty' of life and social dynamics, and it was principally her fascinating account of conducting research within a feminist organisation in Russia that peaked my interest in using this approach in my own research. That I was interested in collecting information on activists own 'sensemaking'<sup>15</sup> (Berg 2007, p.285) in regard to their engagement with concepts such as civil society, activism, gender, and development, as well as their practical engagement with the international development organisations promoting these concepts (and funding their work), also pointed to the relevance of undertaking case study research, given the opportunities that it provides for observing group interactions and dynamics, and how people go about their work. As Gray (2004) notes, case studies can be a means to explore subjects and issues

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with academic working at the American University of Central Asia, female, age 26, 6 July 2009; interview with Gender and development coordinator for international NGO, female, age 32, 7 July 2009; interview with expatriate Regional Advisor, international NGO, male, mid-50s, 20 July 2009; interview with Senior Gender Advisor, international development agency, female, early 40s, 20 August 2009; Interview with Independent Gender Expert, female, mid-40s, 1 October 2009; and interview with NGO leader and academic, female, mid-40s, 28 October 2009.

<sup>15</sup> 'Sensemaking is the manner by which people, groups, and organizations make sense of stimuli with which they are confronted how they frame what they see and hear, how they perceive and interpret this information, and how they interpret their own actions and go about solving problems and interacting with others.' (Berg 2007, p.285)

where relationships may be ambiguous or uncertain, again pointing to their being a useful approach for the kind of issues I wanted to investigate.

However, as I was interested also in studying relationships *between* different gender-focused NGOs, how the power dynamics of these relationships shaped activists' approach to their work, and how different types of organisations were positioned within wider civil society, and in relation to donors, I decided early on to work with three different case study groups, in order to be able to compare and contrast between them. Salmenniemi (2008, p.21) adopted a similar approach in her work on gender and democratisation in Russia, choosing what she saw as two contrasting case studies (a centre for gender studies and a female-dominated professional organisation) with the assumption that this would 'help to highlight different aspects of civic activity, providing information about how certain *types* of organization ... operate'. My aim in so doing was not to try and make a definitive assessment of the gender-focused NGO sector as a whole, but rather, in common with Salmenniemi, to observe how certain *types* of organisation operate (in this case 'alternative' and 'mainstream', as categorised by Moldosheva (2007) and discussed in greater detail below), as well as to understand better the perspectives of activists working within these *types* of organisation. Spending several months with each group would also, I anticipated, allow me to build up relationships with employees and volunteers active in the organisations, facilitating their agreement to participate in interviews (although as discussed above, this was not necessarily the case).

It is, of course, ill-advised to generalise from case study research (Gray 2004), and the particular limitations in regard to the representativeness of my case studies vis-à-vis the wider gender-focused NGO sector are discussed in greater detail below. However, I maintain that this approach has been useful in providing an insight into dynamics within the sector, as well as a means of better understanding my respondents' experiences of being 'active citizens' in the context of development intervention in Kyrgyzstan than a larger scale survey would have allowed.

In chapter 5, I consider each organisation and how it related to and interacted with other NGOs and state and donor actors; here I describe briefly the process of selecting case studies and my experiences of working with them.

### ***Selecting case studies***

As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5, in relation to the characterisation of the NGO sector in Bishkek, my main resources in identifying and choosing my three case studies were conversations with the key informants described above and 'local' literature on civil society in Kyrgyzstan, including an extensive history of the development of civil society in Kyrgyzstan prepared by the Association of Civil Society Support Centers (ACSSC 2006b) and a series of policy briefs on civil



society produced by the Social Research Center at AUCA (Plakhotnikova & Kurbanova 2008; Baktygulov 2008; Jeenbaeva 2008; Matikeeva 2008; Schulte 2008a; Schulte 2008b; Tiulegenov 2008. See also Jailobaeva n.d.; ACSSC 2006a; Moldosheva 2007). My criteria for selecting the three case studies was that they should be 'thriving', in the view of others active in civil society in Kyrgyzstan (so that there would actually be activities that I could observe and participate in), not all working on the same issues and with the same groups (in order to provide what I hoped would be interesting comparisons in regard to activities and approach, as well as relationships with other NGOs and with donors), and, of course, that the group's members would be willing to participate in my research. Following on from the 'mainstream'/'alternative' divide among NGOs working on gender issues identified by Moldosheva (2007) (and discussed in greater detail in chapter 5), I also decided that I would try and ensure that at least one of my case study groups would come from each of these two 'camps'.

In these discussions and readings, the names of several organisations cropped up again and again, as examples of 'successful' or 'thriving' organisations that would make good case studies. My final selection from this list of 'thriving' organisations was facilitated by the fact that in the case of my first (the women's crisis centre) and third (the LGBT rights organisation), acquaintances who I had met in Bishkek offered to introduce me to members of these two organisations.<sup>16</sup> Given the limited amount of time that I had to complete my field research, and the fact that my preliminary investigations had revealed that these two groups were very different both in the issues that they worked on and the way they worked (providing what I hoped would be an interesting contrast), I chose to exploit this opportunity and use these introductions as a means of approaching these two groups and asking if I could work with them and use them as case studies. In addition, the women's crisis centre is identified by Moldosheva firmly as a 'mainstream' organisation, while the LGBT rights organisation was classed as an 'alternative' group. My other case study, an umbrella organisation officially representing over 80 smaller, gender-focused NGOs (many of which were based in rural areas), seemed to occupy a less clear-cut position, given that its remit was to represent the views and interests of a wide pool of smaller organisations, which I felt would be an interesting contrast with the other two case studies. Not having found anyone in a position to introduce me to the group, I took a chance and turned up at their office one morning in September 2009. Fortunately, the staff members present were happy to talk to me, and I was invited to return by the group's chair.

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<sup>16</sup> In the case of case study 1 (the women's crisis centre), one of my initial research respondents (the gender and development coordinator at an international NGO) suggested that she introduce me to the organisation's director. With case study 3 (the LGBT rights organisation), I was introduced by expatriate social acquaintances who I had met soon after my arrival in Bishkek.

Prior to leaving for fieldwork, I had decided that once I had identified suitable case study groups, I would approach their representatives with the suggestion that I could undertake voluntary work for the group, in return for which I would be able to spend time with the group and get to know its employers (some of whom would potentially agree to be interviewed), and have the chance to observe dynamics among those active within each group, as well as how the group and its members interacted with other actors, including representatives of other civil society organisations, donor organisations, and state officials. The idea was that this would enable the three groups to gain something from my volunteer labour within their organisations, and me to feel that I was giving something back in exchange for the insight that I was gaining into how the group worked. In practice, the relationships that I established with the different groups, and the degree of access that these relationships enabled, were very different, and were not dependent (from my perspective) on the amount of 'free labour' I was providing. This echoes the experiences of Salmenniemi (2008), who undertook participant observation within two civic organisations in Russia, and found the experience of collaborating with each organisation to be qualitatively different.

#### **Case study 1: the women's crisis centre**

During my early conversations with those familiar with the NGO sector in Bishkek, the name of this women's crisis centre, which provided a shelter and support services to victims of gender-based violence, was held up as an example of a 'successful' NGO, one that had survived and was now sustainable. This assessment was endorsed in a 2006 report by the Association of Civil Society Support Centers, which included the crisis centre among a list of 25 'exemplary' civil society organisations (ACSSC 2006a, p. 3). I went to meet the director in late July 2009. The initial meeting went well, and I was invited by the director to begin visiting the group's main office twice a week to assist with translation, interpreting, corresponding with donor representatives, and drafting reports and proposals for projects in English.

During my time at the crisis centre, I found that there wasn't much for me to do. In addition, my physical presence in the office two days a week did not in fact give me access either to the staff, or the chance to observe what the organisation actually did. The need to respect confidentiality meant that of course, I could not observe staff members interacting with clients using the shelter that the centre runs. But having initially been told that I would be welcome to observe some of the training sessions that the group ran (with teachers, medical staff, and police officers), whenever I asked about this, I was told that there was nothing going on at that moment, or that some logistical obstacle meant that I could not take part. I was eventually able to observe at two training sessions, although one was conducted in Kyrgyz, meaning that unfortunately, I could follow very little of what was going on.

It was also extremely difficult to secure interviews with the women working at the crisis centre, with the exception of one consultant, a fellow volunteer, and, eventually, the director of the organisation, with for instance, one staff member telling me she didn't think she had anything to say, and another telling me that she didn't feel that her Russian was good enough for a long interview. In addition, very little written material was available in the office, and material that did exist was not out on display (this was in contrast to the other two case study groups, both of which had large amounts of written material produced by or on the organisations, on prominent display and available for visitors to read and take away with them). As such, my impressions of the crisis centre and its operations are based primarily on informal conversations with colleagues over cups of tea, the material that I was asked to translate, or on the couple of occasions when I was asked to interpret between the director of the organisation and visiting donor representatives.

### **Case study 2: the feminist umbrella organisation**

During early conversations, this group was also mentioned as a 'successful NGO', and several of my interlocutors suggested I approach them. Acting as an umbrella for smaller women's rights groups based across the county, the organisation also ran its own programmes; one preparing women candidates to stand for election, the other carrying out research and advocacy on violence against women.

I initially made contact with the group in September 2009, by turning up at their office, where I was able to interview one of the members of staff about the organisation and its activities, and, later that same day, the group's chair. In the interests of 'feminist solidarity' (offered once I had revealed the chair that I was attempting to undertake feminist research<sup>17</sup>), I was invited back by the chair to help the other two members of staff with English practice. I returned a couple of weeks later for English practice, but then did not hear anything from the group regarding my request to volunteer and spend time there until early February 2010; from then on, though, I worked in the office several times a week until I left Bishkek on 23 April. The group's office was generally very busy, with women belonging to its member organisations often dropping in for advice or to share information.

In the event, English practice only occurred two or three times, the reason being that the chair and the two other members of staff all had very heavy workloads and little time. However, my days at the umbrella group were extremely busy, with the chair making what she called 'good use of me'. During my time there I was able to access written material on the group and its activities, on prominent display in the form of a small exhibition in the office's main room, had many long

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<sup>17</sup> The chair of the umbrella group was one of only two of my respondents who openly described themselves as feminist. See chapter 6.

conversations with the chair and her colleagues, participated (as note-taker) at a two-day meeting of members on violence against women and at a national level forum on civil society, and secured interviews with representatives of three organisations that belonged to the group.<sup>18</sup> However, I was always aware that as far as the chair was concerned, my participation at events and my presence in the office were contingent on my having a service to offer in that context; several times when I turned up at the office on an agreed day, I was sent away again.

### **Case study 3: the youth-led, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights group**

In earlier interviews and reading, this group was several times mentioned as an example of a new, active organisation, and one working on issues very different to those of older, more established NGOs. In addition, I had come across the group before arriving in Kyrgyzstan, in the context of commissioning an article on LGBT rights in the region some years previously. Nevertheless, it took me some time to approach the group. In some ways, I felt that the group's activities were too far removed from the sphere of 'traditional' gender issues addressed in development. In addition, the group had already received a lot of attention from outside of Kyrgyzstan, both in media articles (including the one I had commissioned) and in academic studies (such as Wilkinson & Kirey 2010). For both these reasons, I felt that the group could hardly be taken as representative of the wider gender-focused NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan. However, having read Moldosheva's (2007) essay on the women's movement in Kyrgyzstan, and her identification of a new grouping of 'alternative' gender-focused NGOs, including this organisation, I concluded that studying this group alongside my other two 'mainstream' case study groups would be a worthwhile endeavour.

My experience of volunteering at the LGBT rights group was very different to that of my experiences at my first and second case study groups. First of all, it took a long time to establish a relationship with the group. I was initially introduced to some of its members in July 2009 at a social event, but it was a few weeks before I decided to approach the executive director with a view to becoming a volunteer. Once I had proposed becoming a volunteer, there followed a period of negotiation, during which I remained in contact with the director, as she and the staff discussed among themselves whether they wanted me to become involved in the group, and what use could be made of my skills. I was then invited to a meeting at which most of the group's staff were present. It was only then, once all the members of staff had had a chance to ask questions and say whether they were in favour or not, that I was accepted into the group. I later began visiting the group's office

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<sup>18</sup> Interview, director of a women's economic empowerment organisation based in Osh, female, age 37, 24 February 2010. Interview with psychologist at a women's crisis centre, age 47, 5 March 2010. Interview with Director, disabled women's rights organisation, female, mid-50s, 24 March 2010.

and community centre/shelter (which was on the same premises) on a regular basis, from October 2009.

Ultimately, I ended up becoming very involved with the group, but not in the way that I had anticipated. In terms of volunteer activities, there was very little for me to do, as there was high capacity within the group in regard to English, as well as report and proposal writing. Instead, in addition to the odd bits of translation or editing that I was asked to do, I was invited to social events organised for the community, took part in training events, helped out when the group moved offices, and spent a lot of time 'hanging out' in the organisation's kitchen, chatting with members of staff (sometimes in English, if they wanted to practice), volunteers, and people from the community who had dropped by to use the washing machine, borrow books or DVDs from the small library, or just for a chat. I also carried out interviews with five members of staff (facilitated by the media officer, who took it upon himself to ask around to see who was interested in doing an interview).

In this way, having been introduced by people who were already known by, and friendly with, the organisation, and having 'passed' a period of prolonged scrutiny, I was integrated and accepted into this group in a way that did not occur with my other two case study groups, even though I really didn't have anything concrete to do there. With the crisis centre and the umbrella organisation, a decision as to my participating in the group's activities had been taken very quickly, and solely by the head of the organisation in both cases. But once 'in', my access to certain activities, information, discussions, and people was strictly controlled, and I had a clearly defined place in the existing hierarchy. By contrast, once I was 'in' the LGBT rights group, I was pretty much treated like everyone else who made use of the organisation's services, and my participation at events and contribution to discussions were actively sought. While I am sure that there were activities and conversations going on of which I knew nothing, I was never made aware that I was being actively excluded.

## **Limitations**

### ***Language***

I speak Russian to a high standard, having studied the language as an undergraduate, and lived in Russia. I spoke no Kyrgyz at all when I arrived in Bishkek in summer 2009, and managed to acquire very little of the language during the period of my fieldwork. Reflecting this, six of my interviews were conducted entirely in English, one was conducted in a mixture of English and Russian, and the remaining 20 interviews were conducted entirely in Russian.

As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5, Russian remains widely spoken in Kyrgyzstan (and has the status of ‘official language’, behind the ‘state language’ of Kyrgyz) in general and in Bishkek in particular (where many residents are either bilingual or Russian speaking monolingual<sup>19</sup>). This is particularly so within the NGO sector, where it facilitates communication with donor organisations (most of whom have at least one Russian-speaking programme officer) as well as with other NGOs in the wider Central Asian and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) regions. Indeed, as Dave (2004) and Kirmse (2009) argue, Russian remains the language of professional communication in the country. Reflecting this, the NGO activists, volunteers, and employees with whom I came into contact in Bishkek were all able to converse confidently in Russian, and were happy for me to conduct interviews and conversations in Russian.

My decision to interview in Russian or English was taken because I wanted to conduct interviews myself, rather than working through an interpreter. I felt that it was important to establish a direct relationship of trust with my research respondents, albeit for the short period of the interview, one that would not be mediated or inhibited by the presence of a third person. I am fully aware, however, that limiting myself to Russian-speaking respondents may have shaped my research sample, and in particular, may have resulted in a disproportionate (to the wider population) representation of people who were not ethnically Kyrgyz among my research respondents from ‘local’ organisations (seven out of the 16 in-depth interviews that I conducted were with respondents who were not ethnic Kyrgyz). Indeed, one potential ethnic Kyrgyz respondent did decline to be interviewed on the grounds that she did not think her Russian was good enough. But choosing to limit myself to Russian-speaking respondents raises wider questions regarding the representativeness of the findings of this research, beyond the question of ethnicity. As discussed in chapters 5 and 7, being able to speak Kyrgyz and Russian fluently positions those who can do so in a particular space, where they can claim legitimacy as ‘authentic’ Kyrgyz subjects, but at the same time, gain access to the social, cultural, and economic capital that speaking a regional language facilitates (Dave 2004; Kirmse 2009). To put it in more practical terms (and as discussed in chapter 5), in the NGO sector, being bilingual in Kyrgyz and Russian facilitates communication and connection with Kyrgyz speaking ‘beneficiaries’ and service users, and strengthens the NGO activist’s legitimacy in the eyes of those receiving assistance, while enabling communication with Russian-speaking donor representatives and NGO colleagues in other former-Soviet countries, and access to a much wider range of debates, discussions, and written material on issues relevant to development, democracy, gender, and women’s rights (Simpson 2006).

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<sup>19</sup> This will include ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Koreans, Germans, and other smaller ethnic groups. In Bishkek, it also includes Uzbeks.

Given this context, it is highly likely that time spent with monolingual Kyrgyz-speaking organisations, and interviews with monolingual Kyrgyz-speaking respondents would have resulted in a different set of findings. For instance, it is likely that such respondents would have positioned themselves differently in relation to the Kyrgyz state and to the concept of citizenship, possibly relating far more to an idea of delineated 'Kyrgyzness' as a feature of citizenship of the Kyrgyz state. They might have had a completely different understanding of 'civil society' to those that emerged during the interviews that I conducted, and may have seen the activities of their organisations – and their own activism – as serving different ends, and emerging from different motivations and priorities to those expressed by my respondents. Finally, being able to make language-based claims of authenticity might have enabled monolingual Kyrgyz groups to have more harmonious relationships with local state officials and the communities in which they worked, as well as boosting their legitimacy.<sup>20</sup>

In regard to the time that I spent with my case study groups, I was aware as I was carrying out the research that my lack of Kyrgyz language did impact on the quality, and quantity of data that I was able to collect. The women's crisis centre (case study 1) was predominantly a Kyrgyz speaking environment, while at the umbrella organisation (case study 2), staff and visitors switched continuously between Russian and Kyrgyz. This inevitably meant that I was often unable to understand what was under discussion, meaning that my later reflections on, and representation of, interactions within these groups are inevitably incomplete. To some extent, this may have impacted on my 'reading' of the relationships between different NGOs, as well as to relationships within individual organisations.

### ***Location***

Closely linked to the issue of language (in Kyrgyzstan) is that of location, given the predominance of Kyrgyz outside of Bishkek (and the region immediately surrounding it). All data for this research project was collected in Bishkek, and with the exception of one research respondent (the head of an organisation based in Osh, in the south of the country), all of my research respondents lived and worked in Bishkek (even if originally, they may have come from another part of the country). Inevitably, the fact that respondents and the organisations with which they were involved were all based in the capital city will have shaped their experiences and perceptions of being active in the NGO sector, particularly in regard to issues such as contact and relations with donors, attitudes towards the role (and capacity) of the state, and the nature of the activities undertaken.

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<sup>20</sup> See Costa (2014) for a discussion of use of language to consolidate activists' authenticity and legitimacy, drawing on a case study of women's activism in Thailand.

Had I carried out research in a rural area, answers to questions on these issues might have been very different. For instance, questions around donor-dependency, and the extent to which donors ‘set the agenda’ in regard to development in Kyrgyzstan might have had far less significance. This was certainly the case in research carried out by McMann (2004) among rural NGOs in Kyrgyzstan in the late 1990s. McMann found that only 59% of the NGOs that she studied had any contact with international organisations, and of those, only 41% had substantial contact, in the form of participating in an international organisation’s programme, or receiving funding. By contrast, the state, in the form of local and national formal state institutions, and state officials, played a far more significant role in the day-to-day activities and priorities of these activists and their organisations, including providing in-kind funding (e.g., free or subsidised office space).<sup>21</sup> This ‘cooperation’ with state institutions and officials was articulated by McMann’s research respondents as allowing them a far greater degree of autonomy and freedom than more restrictive relations with international organisations; indeed, it was the NGOs that *did* have ‘substantial contact’ with international organisations that feared a potential loss of autonomy, resulting from their reliance on donor funding. Successful cooperation between rural NGOs and local state authorities is also recounted in a UNDP (2006) report on civil society and development in the Kyrgyz Republic, while Babajanian et al. (2005) note the blurred boundaries between state and societal structures (including NGOs) at the local level in the Central Asian republics, in terms of overlapping staff, resources, and networks (see also Pétric 2005).

This absence of international funding is accounted for, according to McMann (2004), by the difficulties that NGOs based away from the capital city face in tapping into international funding streams. The Bishkek-based Association of Civil Society Support Centers (ACSSC 2006b) notes that in the early 1990s, no attempts were made at all by newly arrived donor organisations to work with NGOs outside of the capital and other regional cities, and that later on, rural NGOs were encouraged to access donor funding through national NGOs and NGO ‘support centres’, rather than establishing a direct relationship with the donors themselves. A similar pattern was identified by Hemment (2007) in her work on a provincial feminist organisation in Russia. Here, Hemment found that it was difficult for NGOs based outside of Moscow and St Petersburg to find out information about what grants were available, or to acquire the skills necessary to complete successful grant applications; what money was available at the local or district level was tightly controlled by a local gatekeeper, the head of a district NGO ‘resource centre’. This control over information extends beyond who has access to grant applications, to encompass control over access to discursive resources relevant to

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<sup>21</sup> As discussed in the later chapters of this thesis, only one of my three case studies received any kind of in-kind funding from the state, and this was experienced as unreliable and insufficient.



development, democracy, and most significantly, gender. Writing specifically on gender-focused NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, Simpson (2006) found that a core group of gender-focused NGOs based in Bishkek, and integrated into what she terms networks of 'globalizing gender politics' (p.24), were keeping tight control over gender-related resources that they had obtained. As she recounts, '[f]ew women's organizations, (let alone women, in general) outside of Bishkek know of the [Beijing Platform for Action], [Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women], or the [Millennium Development Goals]; to a large degree, these circulate only among core NGOs, the local elite, donors, and—to a lesser degree—state ministries' (Simpson 2006, p.23).

By the late 2000s when my own research was undertaken, lack of access, or unreliable access, to the internet in rural areas and provincial towns would, no doubt, also have been a barrier to rural NGOs accessing international funding and discursive materials, and being able to participate in regional and international networks. Indeed, this was mentioned in a conversation with a representative of a small, provincial NGO, as well as by a representative of my second case study group (the feminist umbrella organisation), as she talked of the difficulties of keeping in touch with the small, rural NGOs that were members of her organisation (recounted in chapter 5). In this regard, location and language would intersect, given that ability to use the internet in Kyrgyzstan depends on being proficient in Russian.<sup>22</sup> In my observations of the day-to-day activities of the three case study groups, I observed how integral access to the internet was for communicating with donors and activists in other parts of Central Asia and the Former Soviet Union, obtaining information, and, particularly in the case of my third case study group (the LGBT rights group), disseminating information about their own activities and participating in regional and international campaigns.

The activities that NGOs based outside of Bishkek engaged in would also most likely have been very different from those of my case study groups, with, potentially, a greater focus on meeting basic needs rather than on advocacy, reflecting much higher rates of poverty outside of the capital city, and the failure of the state to provide basic social services (see McMann 2004; ACSSC 2006b; McMann 2007). In regard to gender-focused work, stronger expectations regarding traditional gender roles and far more limited opportunities for women and girls to study, work, and live independently of parents or husbands (Simpson 2006) could mean that the priorities of gender-focused NGOs in rural areas would be very different to those of gender-focused NGOs in Bishkek,

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<sup>22</sup> For more on this, see a short article I wrote for *Gender & Development* on the subject of language and location based (as well as gender and age based) 'digital divides' in Kyrgyzstan (Hoare 2010).

with for instance, practices such as bride kidnapping<sup>23</sup> and early marriage being important areas of work (Thieme 2008; Ilibezova 2012). In addition, working in such an environment would most likely shape what areas relating to realising goals of gender equality and women's rights a gender-focused NGO could undertake safely and productively. It would also shape the attitudes of activists themselves to gender roles and relations, and how best to advance the interests of women and girls in their community, as would a (presumed) lack of (or limited) exposure to the rhetoric of gender equality and women's rights, as advanced by international development agencies and NGOs. Writing on Thailand, Costa (2014) notes the very different terms that rural and urban women activists used to frame their activism, with rural activists talking about community development and cultural preservation, while urban activists spoke of feminism, civil society, and human rights.

All of these factors, as well as other aspects of localised 'lived realities' (such as geographical location in the north or the south of the country, local political power dynamics, and the strength or otherwise of religious institutions), would have likely meant that activists based in other parts of the country, and in rural areas, might have answered questions on meanings of civil society, gender equality, activism (including feminist activism), and citizenship in very different ways. As such, the findings discussed in this thesis can in no way be taken as representative of civil society and gender-focused activism within it beyond the confines of my research site, particularly in regard to relationships between Kyrgyzstani NGOs and international donors, and the importance of such relationships in shaping NGOs and their activities. I am well aware of McMann's (2004) critique of studies of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan that have relied solely on contact with NGOs that receive donor funding to claim that '[NGOs] in Kyrgyzstan exist only at the initiative and expense of Western groups' (p.214). Indeed, I hope that this research will in fact serve to extend McMann's critique, in regard to showing that the relationship between NGOs in Kyrgyzstani and their (various) funders are far more complex than this simplistic assessment would imply.

## Thesis outline

The remainder of this thesis is divided into six substantive chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical frameworks for this research, namely: civil society and citizenship, as they have come to be understood and used in the neoliberal, minimal state, post-Washington

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<sup>23</sup> The practice of bride kidnapping, or *ala kachuu*, involves the abduction of a woman by the 'groom' and a group of his male friends and relatives. If the latter succeed in forcing the woman to stay in the groom's house overnight, she then effectively has no choice but to marry him, as in most cases, her family will refuse to take her back. The practice has become widespread in rural areas since 1991. There is considerable debate as to whether non-consensual bride kidnapping (as opposed to consensual, staged 'kidnapping', arranged by the couple themselves to avoid having to obtain parental consent for the marriage, and the cost of the wedding) is actually a traditional, pre-Revolutionary Kyrgyz practice. See Kleinbach and Salimjanova (2007) for a fuller discussion of this.

Consensus development agenda; the gender and development (GAD) agenda and its more recent incarnations; and how these interplay with theoretical approaches to activism and 'active citizenship' in critical feminist and development literature. I consider the theory relating to civil society, why it came to be seen as so important, both in terms of social protection and democratisation, and what the term has come to mean in development. In regard to GAD, I look at the emergence of the GAD agenda and the policy of gender mainstreaming, consider the tensions between GAD's feminist origins and its depoliticised, technocratic implementation, and consider the way that shifting priorities relating to gender have been integrated into wider development agendas.

In chapter 3, I consider briefly the position of women in pre-Soviet Central Asia and present the gendered impacts of the early Soviet development project in the Central Asian Socialist Soviet Republics, before going on to discuss the gendered social contract that emerged in the later Soviet period, focusing on the experiences of women in the Kyrgyz SSR itself (drawing on my respondents' comments and on secondary sources). Finally, this chapter assesses the gendered impacts of the collapse of the Soviet state, and the transition to a market economy. The aim here is to provide some insight into the 'gender regime' (Connell 1990) and the gendered settlement between the people and the state in place in newly independent Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s, as international donors and organisations began to arrive, and programmes to promote gender equality were established.

Chapter 4 addresses the emergence and growth of what I have called 'gender-focused development' in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s and 2000s. This includes consideration of the centrality of 'civil society' and its promotion to the way development has been 'done' in Kyrgyzstan over the last 20 years, and how my respondents have come to understand the idea of civil society, and how it relates to their work. In regard to gender, I look at how my respondents and their organisations 'discovered' gender as an area of concern and how they have integrated it into their work, looking specifically at three areas relevant to the case study groups that I worked with for my research – violence against women, women's political participation, and sexual rights.

In chapter 5, I turn my attention to NGOs working on gender issues in Bishkek. I consider the range of organisations working on gender, their collective location within the wider NGO sector and 'civil society' (as it is understood in this context), and their relations with donors and with the state. I also look at tensions between gender-focused NGOs and the marginalisation of certain constituent groups and issues from the mainstream women's rights caucus, using the example of controversy over which groups were 'allowed' to contribute to the 2008 Shadow Report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Committee). I then go on to outline the development and current situation of my three case-study groups. I compare these three groups,

using the idea of shifting hierarchies in relation to: age; language (the presence or absence of Russian, Kyrgyz, and English speakers on staff); and relations with and access to donors.

Chapter 6 shifts to my respondents' reflections on their own activism, how they define it, and what motivates it. I reflect that despite much theoretical consideration of 'activism' and normative examples of 'active citizenship', there is very little in the literature to explain who is meant by 'the activist'. By contrast, my respondents' accounts point to a clear understanding on their part of who 'the activist' is, how she should behave, and what should motivate her, even if their *own* reasons for becoming active on gender issues may have been more complex and ambiguous. In this chapter, I also assess the answers that I received to the final question posed in most of my interviews, 'Would you say you are a feminist?'.

Chapter 7 turns to activism within the context of development policy and practice in general, and the sponsorship of activist NGOs in particular. Here I address the way that activists – and the civil society they are taken to represent – are presented as instruments for the implementation of donor programmes, while reliance on donor funding for survival often means that it is donor priorities that determine an organisation's activities. Drawing primarily on my interview and observation data, I consider what room for manoeuvre this allows in terms of 'doing' activism, and realising individual and organisational priorities, and how this shapes the impact of organisations' and individuals' work. This chapter also addresses why women dominate the NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan, and my respondents' accounts of the tension between being an activist and being an NGO professional.

## 2. Theoretical framework

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Gender-focused activism and the NGOs within which much of this activism is assumed to take place have emerged in Kyrgyzstan in the context of two important theoretical and policy frameworks in development, namely 'civil society' and 'gender and development'. These both came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, at the same time as the reach of international development was extending into the former Soviet Union, and international development organisations were arriving in Kyrgyzstan. Interest in 'civil society' emerged in relation to its perceived role in democratisation processes in the former socialist eastern European countries, and its subsequent incorporation to the 'good governance' agenda, while gender inequality was effectively institutionalised as a development concern following the adoption of the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing PfA), adopted following the 1995 UN International Women's Conference in Beijing (Baden & Goetz 1997).<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I outline the main theoretical arguments relevant to civil society and gender as development concerns, and link these to the concepts of activism and 'active citizenship', paying particular attention to feminist engagements with the concepts themselves, and with the way that they have come to be 'operationalised' in development.

### **Citizenship, social contracts, and 'active' citizens**

One feature common to most theories of citizenship is that it entails a mix of rights and responsibilities, often encapsulated in the idea of a 'social contract' between the individual citizen and the state. Different philosophical, ideological, and political approaches such as classic liberal political theory, civic republicanism, and communitarianism have placed greater or lesser emphasis on rights versus responsibilities within this contract, which rights should be given pre-eminence, and on whether 'citizenship' is something bestowed upon passive subjects by the state, or is an active process of engagement *with* the state (Turner 1992; Squires 1999). Others have questioned whether citizenship needs or should be conceived in terms of a social contract between the individual and the state at all, or whether the relationships between individuals, and between them and the social institutions that shape their lives are what constitute 'citizenship' for many, particularly those

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm> for the text of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/> for the text of the Beijing Platform for Action (both last accessed 5 September 2013). The final chapter of the Platform for Action (on institutional arrangements) includes the commitment to 'promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective ... in the monitoring and evaluation of all policies and programmes'.

excluded from formal political processes (Dietz 1992; Yuval-Davis 1997; Kabeer 2005a; Dagnino 2007).

### **Liberal citizenship**

Within classical liberal understandings of citizenship, the 'citizen' is presented as a universal, rational, equal, and autonomous subject before the law and the state, and as existing before (and beyond) his position within society (Dietz 1992; Bryson 2003). 'Citizenship', thus, is a formal status denoting membership of a state (Squires 1999). Every citizen is entitled to civil and political rights (to self-determination; protection from discrimination; freedom of thought, conscience, and expression; a fair trial and due process; freedom of association, assembly, and participation; and to vote) by virtue of being human, and these rights take precedence over any duties that the state might demand. Indeed, the purpose of the state is seen as to protect those rights by providing the legal framework and security to enable individuals to pursue their own (economic) ends within the public sphere, while desisting from interfering in the private 'realm of freedom' (Dietz 1992; Bryson 2003). This forms the 'social contract' in liberal political theory.

By contrast, translating the meeting of basic human needs (for shelter, food, security), into so-called social and economic rights is seen '... as entailing excessive state intervention, drawing on public resources and hence constituting an infringement of individual liberty' (Kabeer 2005b, p.2). Likewise, the granting of rights on the basis of group and/or cultural identity is also seen as a threat to the rights of the individual.

This model of citizenship has been heavily critiqued by feminist scholars. Second wave feminist critiques of the 'universal subject' centred on the fact that this subject was clearly male, given that his autonomy and direct relationship with the organs of the state bore little resemblance to the socially constricted reality of the vast majority of women (Bryson 2003). As such, women and their experiences were effectively rendered invisible within this paradigm; indeed Pateman (1988) argues that following Rousseau, classic liberal political theory demanded that women be specifically *excluded* from citizenship, on the grounds that their capacity to give birth rendered them unable to transcend their 'bodily natures' in the manner required of citizens.<sup>2</sup> The supposed division between the 'public' and 'private' spheres as a precondition of liberal citizenship has also been problematised,

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<sup>2</sup> Pateman (1988) also argues that this characteristic renders 'liberal feminism' – which seeks to bring about equality between men and women through formal legislation and the extension of political and civil rights to women – a pointless endeavour, given that women will never be able to become the 'universal citizens' of liberal political theory (see also Bryson 2003). She neglects to remark however the extent to which other 'markers' of identity – race and (dis)ability being two obvious examples – also serve to inhibit the capacity of many male subjects to enjoy the rights afforded the liberal citizen (see Duncan 1996).

not least because of the assumed link made between women, and all things feminine, and the private realm.<sup>3</sup>

Later postcolonial, postmodern and queer feminist critiques have pointed out that as well as being male, the citizen was also white, European, heterosexual, bourgeois, gender-conforming, able-bodied, and had an understanding of himself as an individual first and foremost, able to act according to his own 'rational' free will, rather than as a member of a collective (cultural, ethnic, or economic), bound by the demands and norms of that collective, and indeed, perhaps desirous of acting in its best interests (Kabeer 2005b. See also Dagnino 2007; Kandiyoti 1998; Coomaraswamy 1994; Kim 1993; Duncan 1996)

### **The Soviet social contract**

In the state socialist regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in place in the Soviet Union and eastern bloc countries, the ideal model of citizenship rights centred not on individualised civil and political rights, but on so-called economic and social rights – principally, to work, to education, to health, and to an adequate standard of living. Concordant responsibilities of the individual towards the collective and the state took primacy over individual civil and political rights, as did the requirement that the individual act in the best interests of society (as determined by the state). In state socialist regimes, this social contract came to assume great significance, regulating as it did access to housing, leisure activities, education, healthcare, and all other forms of social welfare provision. How this 'Soviet social contract' was experienced in the Kyrgyz SSR is discussed in chapter 3.

This 'clash' between an emphasis on individual political rights and collective social and economic rights was to shape much of the international rights discourse throughout the Cold War, leading, for example, to two separate rights covenants – the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (both adopted 1966). However, recent critical engagement with the issue of which rights should take primacy has argued that, particularly for those at the bottom of the social order, distinguishing between the two sets of rights is meaningless: 'The reality, of course, is that people do not experience rights – or their deprivation – in a bifurcated manner, distinguishing between rights of a civil-political nature and rights of an economic-social nature' (Nyamu-Musembi 2005, p.42). Rather, each is essential for the realisation of the other, as a result of the '...multidimensionality of power itself' (Kabeer 2005, p.15). Likewise, fighting for the rights of individual women to retain control over their own bodies, for instance, or to enjoy freedom of movement, speech, and association, using the (liberal feminist)

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<sup>3</sup> Debates around the public/private divide and its implications for feminine political subjectivity and agency have received an enormous amount of attention within feminist political theory. See for example Kim (1993), Binion (1995), Bunch (1995), Landes (1998), and Charlesworth and Chinkin (2000).

language of 'liberties' and 'choices' is meaningless, 'especially for the poorest and most disenfranchised, without enabling conditions through which they can be realized' (Yuval-Davis 1997, p.87).

### **Neo-liberal citizenship**

Emerging from classical liberal political and economic theory, neo-liberal views of citizenship assume the de jure and de facto existence of political and civil rights, and have heralded a reorganisation of the balance between social and economic rights and responsibilities in relation to the individual's relationship with the state, with greater emphasis placed on the latter in exchange for a reduction in state 'interference' in the lives of individual citizens (Bryson 2003). Within the neo-liberal paradigm, the citizen is seen as having responsibility for herself, and for meeting her own social welfare needs through making informed 'consumer choices' in a free market unhindered by state regulation (Yuval-Davis 1997; Bryson 2003; Dagnino 2007). This approach has also seen a '...re-definition of the role of the state to a protective role, that of maintaining the freedoms necessary for such self-reliance, intervening only to support those who are incapable of meeting their citizenship obligations through the market' (Kabeer 2005, p.17). In practice, the implementation of neo-liberal macro-economic policies, for instance through IMF-imposed structural adjustment programmes in many developing countries, including Kyrgyzstan, has had on the whole fairly disastrous consequences.

This neo-liberal understanding of rights and responsibilities has clear implications for women's citizenship and for their ability to access social and economic rights which in many cases were previously taken for granted, witnessed in Kyrgyzstan as elsewhere in Central Asia (Bauer et al. 1997; Mandel 2002; Shreeves 2002). For one thing, as the World Bank and every development INGO will tell you, women are over-represented among the poor throughout the developing (and indeed the developed) world. This means that when it comes to utilising their right to 'consumer choice', poorer women are often in a very weak position (Yuval-Davis 1997; Kabeer 2005b). In addition, the introduction of user fees that are beyond the means of many for social services that were previously freely available or heavily subsidised, such as healthcare and, in the case of the former Soviet republics, childcare in particular, means women often face an increased care burden and the promotion of 'traditional family values' to encourage them to accept that burden (Molyneux 1998; Corcoran-Nantes 2005. See also Bauer et al. 1997; Asian Development Bank 2005). This further limits their opportunities for activity outside the home, and by extension, their opportunities to engage directly with the state (rather than relying on male family members to mediate this relationship).



## **‘Active citizenship’**

A radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who acts as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking (Mouffe 1992, p. 4).

Challenging both the idea that citizenship is something bestowed by the state onto passive subjects and the neo-liberal ‘citizens as consumers’ model are conceptions of ‘inclusive’ or ‘participatory’ citizenship that frame it as an active process of contestation with the state, and with other power elites. The idea of the ‘active citizen’ emerges strongly in debates regarding participatory democracy, in both feminist and critical development literature. The idea of active citizenship ‘[recasts] citizenship as practised rather than as given’ (Cornwall & Gaventa 2001, p. 33), and the ‘active citizen’ is one who takes action in collaboration and solidarity with others in the public sphere in order to secure his or her rights – be they civil and political rights to participate in political processes (McClure 1992) or social and economic rights to livelihood, land, and basic services such as healthcare and education (Kabeer 2005b; Nyamu-Musembi 2005). The ‘active citizen’ does not wait for a benevolent state to bestow rights upon her, but rather claims her ‘right to have rights’ (and the right to define those rights), in the face of state opposition or indifference (Kabeer 2005b, p. 4; Dagnino 2007). In this way, those who are denied the formal rights that are associated with citizenship can assume this status through their struggle for those rights, an activity of value in and of itself (Dietz 1992), regardless of any resulting legal status.

Conceptualising of citizenship in this way also has the effect of opening up new spaces for articulating, claiming and realising rights, and for political participation, rejecting as it does the notion that citizenship consists solely of a linear relationship between the individual and the nation state in favour of a ‘horizontal’ citizenship that is shaped (and indeed constituted) as much by relationships *between* citizens, and their locations within different communities, and identity groups, at the local, national, and transnational level (Yuval-Davis 1997; Kabeer 2005. See also McClure 1992; Duncan 1996; Gaventa 2003). As such, ‘active citizenship’ has been an important component of attempts to challenge classical and neoliberal statist understandings of citizenship as a binary relationship between the subject and the state, and to argue for more inclusive, participatory models of democracy, that take into account the many networks within which individuals find themselves, and the power dynamics within those networks (Mouffe 1992; McClure 1992; Dietz 1992; Dagnino 2007; Meer & Sever 2004). ‘Active citizenship’ can also be seen as an alternative to the state socialist ‘social contract’, reconfiguring the citizen as an agent capable of determining her own needs, and articulating these as rights claims, rather than as a subject who must wait for the state to decide what social and economic benefits she should receive. In this regard, however, the use of ‘active citizenship’ as a critique is far less developed.

## Theoretical approaches to 'civil society'

Closely linked to concepts of citizenship is the idea of 'civil society'. While 'civil society' has come to mean something rather particular in the context of development (as will be discussed below), theoretically, the concept is one which is understood very differently across time periods, places, theoretical perspectives, and political persuasions (Woods 2000; Turner 1992; Walzer 1992; Anheier et al. 2001; Giffen et al. 2005; Schulte 2008b; Pétric 2005; Whaites 1996; Lewis 2002). In his 2005 article on civil society in Kyrgyzstan, Pétric notes that different political theorists used the concept in different ways. As developed by Hobbes and Locke, 'civil society' was a notion to convey the tension between individual and/or private interests and collective interest in modern societies (Pétric 2005, p.320, citing Reidel 1984). Marx recognised a split between the illusory political world of the state and the 'real' economic world of 'civil society' (Blakeley 2007, p.95), 'a space of debate that hides relations based on domination in which the capitalist state ensures that power remains in the hands of the ruling class', as such representing a source of state power (Pétric 2005, p.320, citing Cohen & Arato 1992; Chandhoke 2007). This association of civil society with the idea of domination and reinforcing class divisions was further developed by Gramsci, perhaps the political thinker most closely associated with 'civil society'. For Gramsci, civil society was a 'field of action' where the state constructs its hegemony over the masses in alliance with the dominant classes, 'through the so-called private organisations such as the Church, the trade unions, the schools, etc' (Gramsci 1965, p.481, quoted in Hobsbawm 2011, p.323. See also Anheier et al. 2001; Chandhoke 2007). For de Tocqueville, the idea of civil society was linked to the emergence of associations and individuals 'that come to represent a political society distinct from the state' (Pétric 2005, p.320), and which was to act as a limiting force on state power and an arena where society could engage constructively with the state (Chandhoke 2007, p.609; Whaites 1996, p.241). But as Whaites notes, for de Tocqueville not *all* associations could count as members of 'civil society', only those that cut across already existing identity or political groups to address what he calls 'small issues' affecting their societies, and did so 'with the constructive actions of altruistic concern' (Whaites 1996, p.241).

It can be argued that de Tocqueville's association of civil society with groups of citizens separate from the state is the definition of civil society that is most dominant today (Sabatini 2002; Lewis 2002). But where the other boundaries of this 'between' space lie, i.e. with the market, as proposed by Gramsci (Anheier et al. 2001; Chandhoke 2007), or with the household (Manor et al. 1999, cited in Giffen et al. 2005; Yuval-Davis 1997), remains contested. The same applies as to whether the term should (or can) be used in a descriptive sense, to denote a space and a set of institutions that already exist, or whether – following de Tocqueville – it is normative, denoting an altruistic and mutually beneficial ideal to which groups and associations which are independent of the state and of

the market should ascribe (Giffen et al. 2005; Anheier et al. 2001; Whaites 1996. See also Seckinelgin 2006; Chandhoke 2007). For instance, writing about Romania in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Verdery notes that 'civil society' functioned more as an organising ideal than as a defined space or set of institutions: 'To talk of building civil society, like talk of returning to Europe, indicates one's adherence to an entire program of social change (or at least one's opposition to someone else's program). In this sense, "civil society" in post-1989 Eastern Europe is as much a feature of political discourse and symbolism as of societal organisation' (Verdery 1996, p.104). As will be discussed below, this normative ideal is one that has come to be 'operationalised' (in development speak) by donor organisations in the way that they interact with the groups that they see as representing 'civil society'. In the words of the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC), '[a]id policies and relationships are designed for donors' vision of an ideal civil society organisation (CSO): a sympathetic actor who represents the values of citizenship, accountability and participation' (INTRAC 2008, p.2).

## **Civil society and citizenship in development**

### **'Civil society' in the context of development**

'Civil society' has come to be seen as an important concept in development, integral to the effective functioning of democracy and 'good governance'. It is the arena within which 'active citizens' can claim rights against the state; in addition, it has come to embody the sphere in which non-governmental organisations and other forms of civic association intervene to provide a safety net of sorts as the state withdraws from its role in providing social support. As such, it is a term used by those both adhering to, and condemning the neoliberal development model (Chandhoke 2007).

Under what was known as the Washington Consensus, aid conditionalities imposed on developing countries in return for aid and loans in the 1980s had focused on economic structural adjustment and the 'rolling back of the state', i.e. reduction in state spending on social services, and privatisation of state assets. The 'post-Washington Consensus' of the early 1990s arose in response to the recognition that these policies and the resulting reduction in provision of services was in fact leading to increased poverty and inequality, and stunting economic growth (Molyneux & Razavi 2006; Marchand 2009). Heavily backed by the Clinton administration in the United States (1993-2001), the new agenda continued to push neoliberal market reform and privatisation as the only viable model for economic growth and development, but assumed an interdependent link between this and democracy (Molyneux & Razavi 2006, p.13). In other words, without the market, there could be no democracy, and without democracy, the market would not flourish; hence, both were necessary for

development, and both would (ultimately) bring benefits for the entire population (Sharp 1996; Mandel 2002; Whaites 1996).

In two articles written for the journal *Development in Practice* in 1996 and 1998, Whaites charts the way that the idea of 'civil society' became central to this 'new policy agenda' in the 1980s and 1990s (Whaites 1996; Whaites 1998). According to Whaites, interest in 'civil society' was associated with the rising prominence of the idea that aid should be conditional on receiving countries committing not just to economic conditions (i.e. structural adjustment), but also to 'good governance' (Whaites 1996; Uvin 2007; Craig & Porter 2006). 'Good governance' was a principle developed by the World Bank, envisaged as systems and practices of government that were transparent, accountable to citizenry, and not corrupt, where laws were just and effective, and democratic institutions functioned to enable citizens' meaningful political participation (Lewis 2002, p.572; Uvin 2007, p.600, quoting World Bank 1999, p.3). According to the World Bank's theorists, the fault for the failure of neoliberal economic reform to deliver development was taken to lie not with structural adjustment and the deregulation of markets themselves, but with the failure of states to provide 'good governance', i.e. appropriate environments for the market to flourish (Uvin 2007; Craig & Porter 2006). In other words, 'good governance' was seen as necessary for democracy *and* economic growth, 'projected as not only ethically desirable, but also more efficient' (Whaites 1996, p.240, referencing World Bank 1991, p.132).

An adjunct to this agenda was a very specific idea of 'civil society', which as a 'crucial ideological signifier of democratization' (Hemment 2004, p.219), was there to challenge *bad* governance, as well as being instrumental to the implementation of targeted poverty reduction programmes, given the neoliberal emphasis on reducing the size of the state and its role in social welfare provision (see Lewis 2002; Ishkanian 2003; Hemment 2004; Giffen et al. 2005; Craig & Porter 2006; INTRAC 2008). Civil society was to form part of a 'virtuous circle', the 'third sector' to balance the power of the state and of the market, in order to ensure growth, equity, and stability (Lewis 2002, p.571; Hemment 2004; ACSSC 2006b).

The dusty term, drawn from antiquated political theory, belonging to long, obscure and justly forgotten debates, re-emerged, suddenly endowed with a new and powerful capacity to stir enthusiasm and inspire action (Gellner 1994, p.5, on the concept of 'civil society', quoted in Hemment 2004, p.219).

Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens (2005) refer to this understanding of civil society specifically as 'neoliberal civil society', a normative space where the ideals of democracy, justice, and human rights are championed.

While this was the dominant development model pushed throughout the developing world in the 1990s and early 2000s, in the Kyrgyz Republic and the other former Soviet Republics, it was given added impetus as a result of these countries' former status as both command economies, and state socialist regimes. The establishment of 'democracy' and of the 'free market' were seen as integral not just in terms of bringing about economic development, but also in terms of enabling these new countries to function as viable, independent states in the world order: '[n]ational sovereignty required the creation of a market economy', as the authors of a Kyrgyzstani study on the development of civil society in the country note (ACSSC 2006b, p.22).<sup>4</sup> There was no question in the early to mid-1990s that capitalism and democracy were seen as the inevitable – and only viable – successors to state socialism, and that 'civil society' should play a role in consolidating both (ACSSC 2006b; Ishkanian 2003; Howell 1996. See also Verdery 1996; Humphrey & Mandel 2002).

### ***The Eastern European model***

The model for what role civil society could play in democratisation and development was that of the former state socialist Eastern European states – in particular, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and the Baltic States. These countries had begun their 'transition' to democracy (and the free market) several years earlier, leading up to and following the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 (Verdery 1996; Hemment 2004; Hemment 2007; Blokker 2011). Following peaceful, dissident-led protest movements, market reforms had been introduced at the same time as the establishment of the institutions taken to embody liberal democracy; namely multi-party elections to representative national assemblies and a division between the executive and legislative bodies (Mandel 2002; ACSSC 2006b; Blokker 2011).<sup>5</sup> Prior to the Velvet Revolutions, a varied range of civic groups, associations, and unions – from environmental groups to illegal independent trades unions (such as 'Solidarity' in Poland) to the Catholic Church – had been involved in protests, activities, and non-violent resistance that had challenged the autocratic regimes in place, and had succeeded in claiming space to assert their views in a political arena to which they had long been denied access (Blokker 2011; Chandhoke 2007). This movement of 'civil society' was seen as instrumental in bringing down the state socialist regimes, with the ideological association between the actions of

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<sup>4</sup> This assumed symbiosis between democracy, a market economy, and national sovereignty is also evident in a speech given by Roza Otunbayeva (then Foreign Minister) to the UN General Assembly in 1994, where she stated: 'Democracy in my country is very fragile. [...]. But the people of Kyrgyzstan, headed by President Askar Akaev, having made its choice three years ago, firmly and unwaveringly stand for democracy and a market economy.' (A-49-PV.11, 29 September 1994, <http://ukparse.kforge.net/svn/undata/html/A-49-PV.11.html>, accessed 2 May 2013).

<sup>5</sup> As Blakeley (2007) in her feminist critique of mainstream literature on democratisation, and Blokker (2011) in his article on democratisation in Eastern Europe both note, the 'democracy' to which these countries had or were being encouraged to transition was in fact a particular model of representative, 'liberal democracy'. This ignored the 'historical and geographical specificity of this particular form of democracy' (Blakeley 2007, p. 93), the extent to which this model has been and is contested (not least by feminist political theorists), and the fact that, as Blokker (2011) argues, in regard to the Eastern European states themselves, liberal, representative democracy on the Western European model was certainly not the only democratic ideal under discussion among dissident political activists in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.

‘civil society’ and the end of socialism functioning as ‘part of the attraction’ to the concept (Chandhoke 2007, p.611). As such, a vibrant ‘civil society’ came to be seen as integral to functioning democracy by the early 1990s. This was seen as providing, in effect, a blueprint for how to nurture the transition to democracy in similar, post-socialist contexts, such as the Kyrgyz Republic.

### **‘Operationalising’ civil society in development**

The way that this blueprint came to be ‘operationalised’ in development policy was through providing funding and other forms of support (e.g. training, office equipment, exchange visits) to groups identified as ‘civil society organisations’ – most often, registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – there to act as intermediaries between individuals and the state, to enable wider political participation, and to ‘teach civic values such as compromise, cooperation, and trust’ that were assumed to be lacking, particularly in post-socialist societies (Sabatini 2002, p.8. See also Whaites 1996; Mandel 2002; Hemment 2004). The approach in the early 1990s – since problematised by many commentators<sup>6</sup> – was that increasing the number and strength of NGOs equated with strengthening civil society, and hence, democracy. The existence of a large number of civil society organisations was taken as evidence that democracy was being established, regardless of what those organisations were doing, or how representative and participatory they were in their own practices. Across the former Soviet Union (as elsewhere), civil society became another project to be implemented (Hemment 2004, p.221; Lewis 2002), and the 1990s saw the establishment of large numbers of NGOs across the region (Ishkanian 2003; ACSSC 2006b).

Within this wider framework of ‘operationalising’ civil society and good governance, women’s and feminist activism and NGOs – and the wider aim of promoting gender equality – have come to play an important role. As Karybayeva argues, promoting gender equality in national governance was seen as central to the good governance agenda, on the grounds that ‘the utilisation of the abilities of women in national governance secures the inclusion onto the governance agenda of issues which are either new or, else, have been forgotten as well as promoting the growth of political competition, and, ultimately, improving the quality of governance’ (Karybayeva 2004, p.4). Gender equality has also come to be seen by donors as an integral aspect of democracy (and hence, of democratisation programmes), as Jad (2007) argues, resulting in support targeted at gender-focused NGOs.

The way that the idea of civil society has come to be instrumentalised and equated with NGOs within development discourse and practice has been critiqued from a number of angles. Mandel (2002), Whaites (1996; 1998), and Sabatini (2002) all note the failure of those ‘implementing civil society’ to

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Whaites (1996; 1998), Seckinelgin (2006), Sabatini (2002), Lewis (2002), INTRAC (2008), Chandhoke (2007), Mandel (2002), Hemment (2004), and Giffen et al. (2005).

engage with the theoretical underpinnings – and implications – of the term. In so doing, they have robbed it of its political power and of its potential to be a space of contestation and struggle. As Chandhoke argues:

In the process of being presented as an alternative to the formal sphere of politics, the state driven by the logic of power, and also the market driven by the logic of profit, the concept has been abstracted from all debates and contestations over its meaning, and stripped of its ambiguities, its dark areas, and its oppressions, and presented to us as a sphere of solidarity, self-help, and goodwill (Chandhoke 2007, p.608).

Elsewhere, criticism rests on the association between ‘civil society’ and the neoliberal project – as much a political project, Blakeley (2007, p.104) argues, as an economic project – in particular the way that civil society has come to be seen as an *alternative* to the state (Chandhoke 2007, p.609; Whaites 1998. See also Whaites 1996). Central to earlier theorising of the term is the idea that civil society and the state are preconditions for each other’s existence. For instance, Whaites notes that de Tocqueville saw a strong state and a strong civil society as counter-balancing each other, with the strong state acting as ‘a stimulus to civil society, a catalyst for groups seeking to lobby, influence, and secure policy change’ (Whaites 1998, p.344). In contrast, representations of civil society as an alternative to the state rest in part on examples where civil society has appeared to thrive *as a result* of the absence of a strong state, i.e. where a vibrant voluntary sector and strong and vocal civil society have emerged to provide the services that the state is unable to deliver, and which are effectively driving development at the local level (Whaites 1998, p.344). It can be argued that Kyrgyzstan itself falls into this category (McMann 2004), although Whaites does not include it as an example. However, the absence of a strong state able to provide effectively for its citizens and to be held to account through means of democratic participation, Whaites argues, limits the evolution of civil society, as a weak state is not something with which citizens can effectively engage (Whaites 1996; Whaites 1998; see also McMann 2004).

Others argue that the fragmentation of rights claims into civil society interest groups has weakened the power of broad-based political and social movements (such as political parties, trades unions, and feminist movements – see Alvarez 1999; Lewis 2002; Bendaña 2006; Eade 2007) and their capacity to challenge economic inequality. At the same time, the way NGOs have assumed responsibility for service provision to the most vulnerable has served to draw attention away from the weakening of the state and its resulting inability to provide for its citizens, and from the damaging effects of global capitalism and market deregulation (see Craig & Porter 2006). Those writing on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have also noted the vast discrepancy between dissident understandings of ‘civil society’ and what it has come to mean in the context of

development (Blokker 2011; Hemment 2004; Hemment 2007), while others make the argument that promoting 'civil society' forms part of the imposition of Western, hegemonic understandings of concepts such as 'democracy', 'society', and 'human rights' that are culturally and politically inappropriate in many contexts, including in Central Asian societies (Anderson 2000; Akiner 2002; Roy 2002)

However, despite these critiques, both Whaites (1996) and Chandhoke (2007) argue that the term retains value, as regardless of the state of actually existing civil society groups, it remains a *potential* site of contestation and engagement. Elsewhere, Giffen et al. (2005) writing specifically on Central Asia argue that despite the instrumentalisation of the idea in the region by donors, 'civil society' and civil society groups still represent a potential force for positive change, as an arena for critical debate amongst a range of different groups who have 'come to have a real influence on decision taking and policy making' (p.10). I would also argue that on the basis of my respondents' assessment of 'civil society' (discussed in chapter 4), for those who are active in 'civil society', engagement with the term goes far beyond the narrow confines of the NGO sector. This is the case even if for them, it does not function as a central organising framework in regard to their own assessment of their participation in processes of bringing about social change.

### **'Active citizens' in development**

The idea of 'active citizenship' has also become an important aspect of theories of equitable, rights-based development (see for instance Cornwall & Gaventa 2001; Kabeer 2005a; Kabeer 2005b; Meer & Sever 2004; Gaventa & Barrett 2010), which have become increasingly important in shaping development policy and programme since the early 2000s. Central, in practice, to this understanding of 'active citizenship' in the context of development are: wider participation in meaningful decision-making processes; the creation of innovative spaces and mechanisms for citizen engagement (beyond periodic balloting in elections); and the deliberate inclusion of marginalised groups who are usually excluded from exercising their citizenship rights (Cornwall & Gaventa 2001; Kabeer 2005b). As noted in a review of programmes of citizen engagement by Gaventa and Barrett (2010), by the end of the 2000s, the idea of active citizenship had moved beyond the academy, and increasing citizenship participation and engagement had become 'a key preoccupation in the development field' (p. 9), mainstreamed into many programmes and considered an important indicator and 'governance norm' (p. 12) by many donors, on the grounds that this would make public institutions more accountable (see also Hemment 2004). The same review concludes, however, that the impact of such programmes has been varied, or at least, very difficult to measure. In chapter 6 of this thesis, I examine whether 'active citizenship' is an idea that held currency for my



research respondents, in terms of conceptualising their activism and their engagement with 'civil society', as well as their relationship with the Kyrgyzstani state.

### ***Operationalising 'active citizenship'***

In policy documents and research reports (so called 'grey literature') produced by development organisations, the terms 'active citizen', 'activist', and 'civil society actor' are often used interchangeably to denote members of a group who are now seen as key players in development, integral to the successful implementation of programmes. For instance, a conference report on 'The politics of democratic governance: Organising for social inclusion and gender equity' (One World Action 2007) uses the labels 'civil society activists', 'civil society advocates', 'civil society groups' and 'civil society' interchangeably, seemingly treating them as one bounded entity, and placing the responsibility for enacting participatory democracy firmly on their shoulders. Likewise, a policy paper published by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) also treats 'civil society' as a bounded entity, an actor capable of 'spreading awareness' and 'empowering citizens to realise their rights' (DFID 2009, p.69).

The outcome of this effective co-option (as argued by Alvarez in a 1999 article on the 'NGOisation' of feminist activism in Latin America), is that these activists and the groups in which they operate (labelled, somewhat erroneously, as 'partners') have effectively been instrumentalised as implementers of development policy on behalf of international organisations and donors, as this statement from USAID makes clear:

USAID programs in the Kyrgyz Republic are implemented through contracts and grants by more than 40 local and international organizations. Implementing partners include U.N. agencies, for profit companies, and non-governmental organizations.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, as argued in a report on civil society by INTRAC (2008), '[a]mong aid agencies, working with CSOs [civil society organisations] is considered to be a means to an end: however donors have defined their objectives, CSOs have often been deployed as a means of achieving them' (p. 2). In addition, as will be discussed in chapter 4 in relation to NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, within the dominant neoliberal development discourse, NGOs and the activists within them have also been used as a means of encouraging citizens in the wider society to become more 'active' within the terms of neo-liberal citizenship, taking personal responsibility for their own and their families' wellbeing, rather than relying on the state. As argued by Cornwall et al (2008), Alvarez (1999), Hemment (2004; 2007), Chandhoke (2007), and others, this has had the effect of de-radicalising and simplifying the concepts of both 'activism' and 'civil society', to which I would also add 'active citizenship'. In

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<sup>7</sup> See [http://www.donors.kg/en/donors/usaids\\_eng](http://www.donors.kg/en/donors/usaids_eng) (last accessed 3 September 2009). The information on the donors.kg website has since changed.

addition, as will be discussed in chapter 6 in regard to my own research findings, associating the idea of citizenship (active or otherwise) with activism appeared to be at odds with the way that my respondents conceptualised their own gender-focused activism, and their motivations for engaging in it.

## **Gender and women's rights in development**

Emerging from similarly contested and transgressive theoretical origins as those of 'civil society' and 'active citizenship', 'gender' as a development concern has also gone through processes of co-option and 'operationalisation' in mainstream development discourse, programme, and policy. These processes have particular relevance for activists involved in women's NGOs and gender-focused NGOs, which have come to be seen as important actors in the realisation of the goals of the gender and development, and more recent 'women's rights and gender equality', agendas.

The arrival of gender to mainstream development discourse followed 25 years of concerted efforts on the part of feminists working in development to draw attention to the fact that far from development being 'gender blind', women and men experience processes of development differently, and benefit or lose out from these processes differently. Three of the most influential approaches in regard to this have been 'Women in Development' (WID), 'Women and Development' (WAD), and 'Gender and Development' (GAD).

### **Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD)**

The first major piece of work to address women's economic roles and their experiences of development was Esther Boserup's (1970) book *Women's Role in Economic Development*, which examined women's role in agrarian production and in industrialising Third World economies (Craig 2007; Zwart 1992; Rathgeber 1990). In her book, Boserup argued that women were heavily involved in agrarian production, and that the sexual division of labour inside and outside the home influenced – and was influenced by – processes of development. But thus far, women had been systematically marginalised and excluded from development programmes and their purported benefits because they were assumed by colonial and post-colonial administrators not to be economically active. Elsewhere, employers in industrialised market economies preferred male to female employees, or employed women at lower rates of pay, on the basis that their income would be supplementary to family income, rather than integral to it.

The reasons for this were that the development theory and practice that dominated in the 1950s and 1960s – both mainstream and more radical dependency and underdevelopment schools of thought – were shaped primarily from a perspective that saw men as household heads and

‘productive agents’, and women as dependent housewives and mothers (Kabeer 1994; Craig 2007). Development programmes that did target women tended to consist of ‘welfare’ interventions, focusing on nutrition, family planning, and child-rearing, rather than on women as economic agents (Kabeer 1994, chap.1; Beneria & Sen 1982; Tinker 1976). In so doing, rather than widening women’s economic opportunities, such an approach effectively reinforced values that restricted women’s roles to the home and their dependency on male breadwinners, including in societies where they in fact performed the bulk of productive labour (Tinker 1976; Kabeer 1994).

The ‘Women in Development’ (WID) movement effectively kick-started by Boserup’s research sought to address the exclusion of women from development through targeted policies and strategies that would enable them to benefit to a greater extent from development, and contribute to economic production (Craig 2007). In so doing, it sought to ‘shift attention from *welfare to equality* for women in the development process’ (Kabeer 1994, p.6, italics in the original). In the context of the UN Decade for Women (1975-85) and the growing influence of liberal feminism in the global North, WID was rapidly adopted as a policy framework by many development institutions and organisations, leading to the establishment of WID desks and advisory posts, and targeted WID projects to integrate women into development programmes (Craig 2007). These included the promotion of women’s and girls’ access to education, income generation and micro finance projects targeted at women, and promoting women’s access to agricultural and other forms of technology (Zwart 1992; Kabeer 1994). In addition, by the late 1980s, several dedicated women’s entities had been established within the UN system, including the Division for Women and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), as well as WID units within the various specialist agencies of the UN and within the large bilateral and multilateral donor agencies (Beneria & Sen 1982). Relatively quickly, WID scholarship and advocacy became the established voice of feminism within mainstream development agencies and institutions (Kabeer 1994). Opportunities for lobbying and networking at the international women’s conferences held in Mexico City (1975) and Nairobi (1985) acted as catalysts for the emergence of women’s NGOs, held up by liberal feminists as the ideal institution from which to make women’s rights claims (Bernal & Grewal 2014a).

The adoption of the WID agenda represented a significant shift in thinking within mainstream development. As part of the wider international ‘second wave feminist’ movement to promote women’s rights globally, culminating in the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979,<sup>8</sup> the achievements of those promoting the WID approach cannot be ignored. However, by the mid-1980s, it was apparent that while WID

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#> for the text of the Convention (accessed 27 June 2012).

had achieved a great deal in terms of 'symbolic politics', it had not brought about significant changes in women's status or wellbeing (Kabeer 1994, p.9, citing Staudt 1985). This reflected the fact that despite WID's initial enthusiastic reception within development organisations, the practical incorporation of a WID approach into the work of male-dominated agencies faced considerable resistance, particularly in regard to calls for women's equality (Rathgeber 1990). As a result, the need to incorporate women into development processes was reconfigured from a question of unequal access to resources to their efficiency as 'managers of low-income households' and the support that they needed to ensure the basic needs of families were met (Kabeer 1994, p. 7). Inevitably, this served to reinforce rather than challenge the existing sexual division of labour. In this way, WID's potential as a transformative, feminist agenda lost much of its power.

That said, other Marxist feminists and radical feminists working in development argued against WID as a transformative agenda at all. WID sought to draw women into development on the grounds that they had previously been excluded or marginalised, and that they would automatically gain from inclusion. As such, it reflected the liberal feminist idea that integrating women into the existing economic system – through removing barriers to their participation and ending discrimination against them – was the best way to improve their situation. The problem of women's exclusion was not seen to lie with the structure of the mainstream model of liberal market economics and modernisation, but rather, with development planners and practitioners, whose 'irrational prejudices and misplaced assumptions led to discriminatory outcomes' (Kabeer 1994, pp.19–20).

By contrast, the Women and Development (WAD)<sup>9</sup> – or 'neo-Marxist feminist' (Rathgeber 1990, p.492) – approach, which emerged in the second half of the 1970s and drew on Marxist analysis and dependency theory, argued that women had always been integral to economic production and development processes, and that their labour inside and outside the home was essential to the survival of their families and wider societies (Craig 2007; Zwart 1992; Rathgeber 1990). However, this involvement in development had been exploitative in nature (Mies 1986, cited in Craig 2007), and women's integration into the economy as a class had served 'primarily to sustain existing international structures of inequality' (Rathgeber 1990, p. 493). Women in developing countries would only be able to benefit from development once the unequal global economic system had itself been transformed (Kabeer 1994, p. 41, quoting Maguire 1984). The WAD approach never had the same level of influence over the design and implementation of projects within mainstream development agencies and institutions as WID, but nevertheless represented an important critique

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<sup>9</sup> WAD was by no means the only 'alternative', Marxist-influenced approach to women's position in development to emerge in this period. See Kabeer (1994, chap .3).

of the liberal assumptions and on-going adherence to modernisation theory that lay behind WID (see for instance Beneria & Sen 1982; Mies 1986).

Both the WID and WAD approaches were critiqued for their failure to consider women's participation in society beyond the economic sphere. In so doing, they effectively ignored the considerable reproductive labour that the majority of women perform, and failed to consider how bringing women into income-generation projects, for example, would add to their time burden (Rathgeber 1990; Zwart 1992), particularly at a time when structural adjustment programmes imposed by the international financial organisations were resulting in major cutbacks in public expenditure in many countries, shifting responsibility for welfare services back into the home and increasing women's care burden (Elson 1991). And while the WAD approach took a more critical view than WID of women's position and their exploitation as a class, it failed to consider the role of unequal gendered power relations within the private and public spheres *within* all classes in shaping women's capacities to benefit from development processes (Rathgeber 1990). In addition, both approaches tend to view women as a homogenous group, ignoring the way that gender intersects with aspects of social identity such as race, class, and age, to shape a particular woman's experiences of poverty and development (Rathgeber 1990; Zwart 1992).

### **Gender and Development (GAD)**

Emerging after the 1985 Nairobi UN World Conference on Women, and in the light of the perceived failure of WID and its associated policies, the main theoretical and political shift behind the emergence of 'gender and development' (GAD) in the late 1980s and early 1990s followed debates already taking place within third wave feminist circles; namely, embracing the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender, giving greater consideration to wider structures of political and economic power, and questioning the homogeneity of the very category of 'women' (Baden & Goetz 1997; Rai 2002; Wilson 2007). Central to the idea of gender as a social construct is the notion of power, and of how power dynamics shape the relationship between genders (Thorburn 2000, p.2). In contrast to the WID and WAD approaches, this included special attention to gender roles and gendered power dynamics *within* the household (Rathgeber 1990), moving beyond a consideration of women's relationship to development that solely focused on economic productivity, to one that also took into account the gender dynamics of labour and control over resources within the home and in different social contexts (Rai 2002).

This shift from thinking about biological sex to socially constructed gender has been enormously influential in the way that roles and relations between women and men have come to be conceptualised in development programme and policy, including in the way that the idea of gender

inequality was effectively 'exported' to Kyrgyzstan and other post-soviet countries in the 1990s. As discussed in chapters 3 and 4, this was in contrast to the representation of sexual difference in late Soviet rhetoric and social policy. These saw women's role as mothers as biologically determined (assigning economic and social value to the role of 'worker mothers' and the workplace and maternity benefits that came with this), while at the same time recognising women's oppression as a political class, to be rectified at some distant future point through the socialisation of all reproductive labour (see Sidorova, ed., 1975), rather than by addressing women's present inequality in Soviet homes, schools, and workplaces. As apparent from conversations with my research respondents discussed in chapter 4, this meant that when women coming into the NGO sector in the 1990s were introduced to the word 'gender', it was encountered as an entirely new concept, and way of thinking about their work.

The development of the GAD approach was also shaped by the work of Third World feminists, who questioned the representation of 'Third World women' within feminist engagements with development (see Wilson 2007; Rai 2002). Particularly influential was the article 'Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses' written by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in 1988, which problematised the 'production of the "Third World Woman" as a singular monolithic subject' (p.61) in many Western feminist accounts, universally oppressed by a monolithic patriarchy and in need of rescuing. Mohanty challenged this representation, but also the right of feminists based in the West to determine the priorities for global feminist organising, and their privileged and unquestioned position in producing knowledge about women in other locations. This echoed the similar challenges being made by Women of Color feminists, particularly in the USA, that the demands articulated by second wave feminism reflected the concerns and priorities of white, middle-class women, and ignored the way that other aspects of constructed social identity – principally race and class, in the original framing of the argument – could shape women's opportunities and experience of oppression (see Collins 1990). This gave rise to the idea of intersectional discrimination as a framework of analysis, extending to incorporate sexuality, disability, religion, location, age, and other dimensions of subordination across different social settings (Bose 2012, p.67).

In the context of development, this allowed for a broader exploration of social relations and how they shaped women's participation in society, beyond their role as (potential) economic agents (Craig 2007). It also, by highlighting intersectional discrimination, enabled a focus on the complex and potentially contradictory nature of development, and of the way that other aspects of social identity intersect with gender to mean that development gains enjoyed by certain groups of women

were often at the expense of other women (see Molyneux & Razavi 2006).<sup>10</sup> In addition, the feminist theoretical underpinnings of GAD called for a greater emphasis on women as social actors within processes of change, 'rather than merely passive recipients of an unfolding historical logic' (Craig 2007, p.116). It was in this context that arguments were made by feminists in development in favour of supporting and promoting women's and feminist activism in developing countries, an aim that effectively became 'operationalised' through providing financial and institutional support to women's NGOs.

By the late 1990s, GAD had become the dominant feminist discourse within development, gaining official recognition and becoming 'institutionalised' in the form of advisory posts in international agencies and NGOs, dedicated postgraduate courses taught in universities, training programmes, and the policies of women's national machineries and development departments (Cornwall et al. 2008. See also Jackson 1998; Baden & Goetz 1997). This led to many changes within development institutions in regard to the adoption of gender training programmes, hiring of gender specialists, and the demand that gender be considered in the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes (Moser & Moser 2005), as well as the high-profile adoption of gender-related indices in international frameworks for measuring development, such as the Millennium Development Goals and the Human Development Index (HDI), published annually by UNDP (Craig 2007). At the practical level, in addition to the promotion of 'gender mainstreaming' in programming (discussed in more detail below), GAD and its consideration of intersectional discrimination and marginalisation has also contributed to a wider focus on rights in development (Rathgeber 1990).

### ***Gender mainstreaming***

The notion of gender mainstreaming grew out of the realisation that the concerns for women and gender issues should not remain marginal to the ideas and practices of development organisations, but should be central to them, and hence located in their 'mainstream' (Smyth 2007, p.585).

The agreement that consideration for gender and gender inequality was necessary at every stage of the development programme was one of the main achievements of the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference, translating into a formal, international-level commitment to the policy of gender mainstreaming (Baden & Goetz 1997; Moser & Moser 2005). That is, 'the process of assessing the

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, better access to education and changing attitudes towards women's employment among the urban middle classes and dominant social, ethnic and / or religious groups could lead to well-paid employment and economic independence, but at the expense of lower class women, often from rural areas and / or from marginalised social, ethnic or religious groups, forced into low-status, poorly paid domestic work (among other forms of employment) – in effect, assuming the care burden of the first group of women – cutting them, and often their daughters (who then have to assume more of the care burden at home) off from educational and more lucrative employment opportunities (see Molyneux & Razavi 2006).

implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels' according to the definition set out by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), to which most development institutions adhere (United Nations 1997, p. 28, quoted in Moser & Moser 2005, p. 12. See also Tiessen 2007, p.12). As such, gender mainstreaming has come to be seen as the policy most associated with GAD.

The way gender mainstreaming was (or is) implemented in practice of course varies, but Smyth points to a general divergence between agencies proposing to integrate gender into the mainstream, or to use it as a tool to *transform* that mainstream (Smyth 2007). Elsewhere, in a review of gender mainstreaming policies adopted by 14 large development organisations (including bilateral donors, international financial institutions, UN agencies, and international NGOs) between 1995 and 2005, Moser and Moser (2005) typify gender mainstreaming within these institutions as consisting of the following components: a dual strategy of mainstreaming gender combined with targeted actions for gender equality; gender analysis; shared responsibility among all staff within the organisation, but with support from dedicated gender specialists; gender training; support to women's decision making and empowerment; and monitoring and evaluation. As Moser and Moser's review found, all the organisations assessed had adopted a policy of gender mainstreaming, but the policy's implementation was often undermined by a lack of organisational commitment and a culture of resistance to something seen as imposed from above, exacerbated by consistent practices of hiring junior consultants with little authority or influence to support gender mainstreaming.

### ***The critique of GAD***

A gender-and-development perspective does not lead only to the design of intervention and affirmative action strategies to ensure that women are better integrated into ongoing development efforts. It leads, inevitably, to a fundamental reexamination of social structures and institutions and, ultimately, to the loss of power of entrenched elites, which will effect [*sic*] some women as well as men (Rathgeber 1990, p.495).

The main critique of GAD is that it has failed to deliver the promises summarised in the quotation above. In reality, the effect has been closer to this:

When, during the United Nations Women's Conference in Beijing, the policy of gender mainstreaming was accepted – and later reaffirmed in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – the result was that much of the originality and issues raised by GAD were marginalised and excluded from the development (policy) agenda (Marchand 2009, p.922).

As Cornwall et al. (2008) note, the achievements of women's rights activists in influencing the outcomes of the Vienna and Beijing conferences are now seen by many feminists working in development as a high point in regard to getting 'progressive feminism' (p. 15) onto the agenda.



Since then, they argue, the post 9/11 security agenda, the increasing influence and voice of the religious right across the world, and the on-going dominance of neoliberal economic policy have led to the marginalisation and muting of feminist voices within development. This was manifest in the decision 'not to hold an International Women's Conference in 2005 for fear of losing gains that had been made up to 1995' (Cornwall et al. 2008, p. 15; Molyneux & Razavi 2006).

But critique of the GAD agenda and its impact has also come from feminist academics and development practitioners themselves. Early criticisms, including those voiced by women's rights activists from the global South at the Beijing Conference itself, centred on the idea that the adoption of gender relations as the main frame of analysis would lead to women once again becoming invisible in development, with resources being removed from projects designed to support women (Baden & Goetz 1997; Rai 2002; Craig 2007). Baden and Goetz (1997) point to how this disjuncture between the promotion of gender mainstreaming by Northern-based feminist advocates within development and what Southern activists saw as the priorities in their work fuelled the perception that GAD represented the imposition of an external agenda that did not necessarily serve their interests.

However, one of the main elements of more recent critiques of GAD as it has been adopted by policymakers and practitioners is the way that GAD, and the word gender, are almost always exclusively associated just with women and girls (Smyth 2007; Marchand 2009). In the view of Davids and van Driel (2009, p.908), gender analysis has been reduced to consideration of women: 'gender mechanisms are not analysed as a set of intersecting and complex power relations but merely as certain effects on women and on women only' (see also Rai 2002).

Another main cause of contestation is the perception that in its implementation, GAD has become a de-politicised, technical project, one where meeting targets and indicators have come to be more important than the political process of challenging gender inequality and transforming social relations. As Smyth (2007, p.582) puts it, terms such as 'gender', 'empowerment', 'gender mainstreaming', 'which originated in feminist thinking and activism have lost their moorings and become depoliticised', while Baden and Goetz (1997) argue that the word 'gender' has come to be used in a way that 'minimize[s] the political and contested character of relations between women and men' (p. 10). The result of this is that 'real women and men' and what Smyth (2007) terms the 'messy realities of their lives and relations' (p. 586) have been turned into the neat categories and tick-boxes necessary for logical frameworks, monitoring tools, and management systems. It is in this technocratic, de-politicised form that GAD was effectively 'exported' to the new NGOs established in

Kyrgyzstan and other parts of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, through the gender training provided by donors arriving in the region (discussed in greater detail chapter 4).

This tendency has also given rise to what Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead (and others writing in their edited volume) term 'gender myths', by which particular framings of a problem and its solution come to be taken as given, and are used by advocates as shorthand to enlist actors who 'span different sites of engagement' (Cornwall et al. 2008, p. 4. See also Baden & Goetz 1997). They argue that ideas such as the feminisation of poverty, that female-headed households are universally disadvantaged and marginalised, or that women leaders are less prone to corruption, have been used effectively and pragmatically by feminist advocates in development to get their concerns onto the agenda. This has been, though, at the expense of universalising women's experiences and patterns of gender inequality, and again, simplifying the issues, and masking the complexities of the relations between women and men, and the dynamics of living in poverty (Cornwall et al. 2008; Davids & van Driel 2009). This process of strategic myth-making is the result of 'significant, but far from simple, stories about the pressures feminists experience in their encounters with development: pressures to simplify, sloganize and create narratives with the "power to move" that come to depend on gender myths and give rise to feminist fables' (Cornwall et al. 2008, p.13). This idea of 'gender myths' has particular relevance in the context of assessments of women's activism and prominence in the civic sphere, as discussed below and in chapter 6. It is also relevant to an assessment of how gender roles and relations have been shaped by (and, arguably, have shaped) the social and economic upheavals experienced in Kyrgyzstan and other post-socialist countries in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, with women presented as the 'ultimate victims of the transition', as discussed in the next chapter.

Within many development organisations, responsibility for the supposed failure of gender mainstreaming is laid firmly at the feet of the idea itself, and of the gender specialists promoting it. As Moser and Moser (2005) argue, there has been little challenge to the agencies and practitioners who have failed to implement gender mainstreaming effectively, and few attempts to tackle the considerable resistance within many development organisations to the idea that striving for gender equality should be a priority at all. By contrast, much 'feminist inspired literature' (Smyth 2007, p. 586) has pointed instead towards the failure of many organisations to accept that truly 'mainstreaming gender' would require fundamental transformations *within* such organisations, in regard to gendered (not to mention location and 'race'-based) hierarchies of power (see also Moser & Moser 2005). As Rao (2006, p.64) argues, '[w]hile the intention of gender mainstreaming is

transformation, it has been chewed up and spit out by development bureaucracies in forms that feminists would barely recognise’.

Elsewhere, in a 2006 research report considering progress on gender equality in the ten years since the Beijing conference, Molyneux and Razavi (2006) argue that the issue may be that what is measured as progress for women is often contingent, and has become highly politicised. Within the context of on-going adherence to the idea that modernisation and development are an ‘inevitable and *linear* process’ (Molyneux and Razavi 2006, p. 3, italics in the original) promoted principally by economic growth, and that an equalisation of gender relations is an undisputed outcome of that process, progress made against indicators such as literacy, school enrolment, and access to contraception can mask growing inequality and poverty resulting from economic globalisation and market liberalisation, the reliance of many poverty-reduction strategies on women’s unpaid or poorly paid labour, and the intransigence of the gender division of labour within the home. Likewise, the presence of large numbers of women in the NGO sector enabled by donor commitment to supporting gender-focused NGOs can mask tensions and processes of exclusion within and between NGOs, reinforcing the marginalisation of certain groups of women, while consolidating the power of others (as discussed in the context of Kyrgyzstan, in chapter 5), just as it can draw attention away from women’s underrepresentation in formal political processes and power structures.

On a more practical level, Moser and Moser (2005) note that failure on the part of many organisations to carry out effective, consistent, and systematic monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of gender mainstreaming outcomes and impacts means that there is very little evidence to ‘prove’ the positive impact of such policies. As they argue, determining indicators to measure changes in power and status is an extremely difficult thing to do, particularly in an organisational culture where there may be considerable resistance to the idea of gender equality in the first place. They also argue that as gender mainstreaming is a process rather than a goal, it cannot in fact be argued that it has ‘failed’.<sup>11</sup>

### **From GAD to ‘women’s rights and gender equality’**

Making gender equality a reality is a core commitment of UNDP globally. [...] By applying two complementary approaches to achieving gender equality – ‘mainstreaming gender’ and ‘women’s empowerment’ – UNDP, in close collaboration with other UN agencies such as UNIFEM, UNICEF and UNFPA, has played a significant role in creating an enabling environment for gender equality in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Moser and Moser’s (2005) suggestions for alternative monitoring and evaluation of gender mainstreaming include the use of multiple indicators and triangulation, and combining qualitative and quantitative indicators.

<sup>12</sup> Taken from the UNDP Kyrgyzstan website, <http://www.undp.kg/en/what-we-do/cross-cutting-themes/gender> (last accessed 12 September 2013).

As Smyth (2007, p.586) notes, in response partly to what she calls ‘gender fatigue’ and the perceived failure of gender mainstreaming, since the mid-2000s there has been a move away from gender mainstreaming as a stand-alone policy, towards a re-focussing on women as a discrete target group within development. As the quotation above from UNDP Kyrgyzstan indicates, this is increasingly resulting in policies that try to combine the two approaches. These have somewhat clumsy titles along the lines of ‘women’s rights and gender equality’ (Oxfam GB – see Smyth 2007) or ‘gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment’ (UNDP), epitomised in the title of the new UN agency, UN Women, which aims to promote ‘gender equality and women’s empowerment’. In this context, the dual approach adopted by UNDP and detailed in the statement above of ‘mainstreaming’ gender into activities, combined with projects targeting women as beneficiaries often aimed at eliminating violence against women, alleviating poverty amongst women, particularly in rural areas, and increasing women’s participation and representation in decision-making processes, is one that is fairly standard among donors and international organisations operating in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere. ‘Women’s rights and gender equality’ has thus effectively become the rhetorical and policy framework within which the gender-focused NGOs that I encountered in Bishkek are operating today, with ‘women’s NGOs’ continuing to be seen as an important means of implementing donor policy in this area, both in terms of delivering services to women, and in enabling women’s empowerment.

In her article, Smyth (2007) is hopeful that this represents an opportunity to re-politicise work on gender inequality in development, with the adoption of arguments based on intrinsic rights rather than welfare-focused instrumentalism and economic efficiency. However, this shift towards ‘women’s rights and gender equality’ – and a rights-based approach more generally – has occurred at the same time as the adoption by bilateral and multilateral donors of a new set of principles to govern the delivery of aid. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, agreed by the donor countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) in 2005 (the main international development donors), commits donors to five principles designed to make the delivery of aid more effective, including national ownership of development policies, and the harmonisation of aid delivery among donors (Kerr 2007; OECD 2007).<sup>13</sup> As a report by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) points out, gender equality is only mentioned once in the Declaration, featuring as a ‘cross-cutting issue’,

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<sup>13</sup> The five principles of the Paris Declaration are: Ownership: developing countries will exercise effective leadership over their development policies, strategies, and to coordinate development actions; Alignment: donor countries will base their overall support on receiving countries’ national development strategies, institutions, and procedures; Harmonization: donor countries will work so that their actions are more harmonized, transparent, and collectively effective; Managing for Results: all countries will manage resources and improve decision-making for results; and, Mutual Accountability: donor and developing countries pledge that they will be mutually accountable for development results (Kerr 2007, p. 54).

alongside environmental sustainability (Kerr 2007, p.54), indicating that neither issue is seen as central to the delivery of effective and accountable aid. In addition, the emphasis on national ownership of development strategies, while welcomed in terms of 'empower[ing] governments to set their own national priorities' (UNIFEM 2007, p. 3), has meant a move towards funds being channelled directly to receiving country governments (direct budget support), and away from funding to 'civil society' groups. Assessments made by AWID, UNIFEM, and the Women In Development Europe (WIDE) network indicate that an outcome of this is an increasing invisibility of gender equality and women's rights as policy concerns in national development strategies (Kerr 2007; UNIFEM 2007; Staszewska 2011). Indeed, some of my research respondents noted that this was apparent in Kyrgyzstan, with the disappearance of gender desks and ministerial responsibility for gender equality within the state administration.

This process has been exacerbated by the fact that as donor funding streams to national NGOs dry up (on the grounds that such groups should now be seeking financial support from within their own countries), groups advocating women's rights and/or gender equality are in a far weaker position to put pressure on their governments to address these issues (Kerr 2007; UNIFEM 2007; Staszewska 2011). This is particularly the case in countries where organisations working on women's rights and / or gender equality are perceived to be working in opposition to the government, making it very difficult for them to obtain state support to fund their activities (Kerr 2007, p. 57). In the context of Kyrgyzstan, a 2009 report by the International Crisis Group argues that a shift in 2003-2004 in donor funding away from grassroots-level work to what it terms 'large institutional initiatives' (p. 25) is one factor contributing to the increasing influence of Islamic fundamentalist groups in rural areas. Initiatives at ministerial and parliamentary level were launched with the aim of bringing about their reform, on the assumption that this would later translate into positive changes at the local level. But what has instead happened, the report argues, is that donor money is no longer reaching rural communities via the secular NGOs who are (or were) active there, and fundamentalist groups have stepped in to provide direct support and assistance to those living in poverty.

## **Women, activism, and civil society**

Women's organisations, women as active citizens, and women in decision-making positions are a major driving force for strengthening accountability with regard to women's rights and gender equality. Women's organisations are vehicles for women's claim-making capacity and for women's leadership (HIVOS 2006, p.19).

As discussed above, the 'idealised' civil society organisation (INTRAC 2008) is taken as a proxy for the activists (or 'active citizens') assumed to be active within it, and those activists as proxies

themselves for the constituent groups they are taken to represent. Nowhere is this more apparent than in regard to 'women's organisations', where there is assumed to be an intrinsic link between the gendered identities of the people within such groups, their activism, and their capacity to represent the interests of other women. Women's NGOs and women's activism have come to be seen as a key mechanism for both empowering women (those active in the NGO as well as those in receipt of its assistance) and hence, helping to bring about gender equality, and of reaching women 'target populations' (see the volume edited by Bernal & Grewal 2014b). This has become a taken-for-granted fact – another 'gender myth' – in development, one that extends in some accounts as far as to mark the entire non-governmental sector as feminine, the ideal space from which women's rights-claims can be voiced (Bernal & Grewal 2014a). As the case of the NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan shows, and as discussed in chapter 5, this assumption of shared common purpose (not to mention the assumption of a shared common gender identity) masks significant tensions and processes of exclusion.

But what do we actually mean by 'activism', and, in the context of mainstream development, by extension, 'active citizenship'?

### **What counts as (feminist) 'activism'?**

Reviewing the literature, it becomes apparent that there are many different ways of defining 'activism' in general, and feminist (and / or women's) activism in particular. In their 2007 article 'What counts as activism? The role of individuals in creating change', Martin, Hanson, and Fontaine (2007) argue that many of the everyday actions that individuals do to 'help' others constitute activism, because they have a positive transformative effect on social networks in the individual's immediate community. Actions that emerge from people's everyday lived experiences, such as refusing to tolerate sexual harassment in their workplace, play a crucial role, they argue, in shaping the social networks and relations necessary for social change, which may in turn evolve into more formalised, institutionalised social movements and political action. It is the transformative impact these actions have on existing power relations, as well as their potential to grow into more formalised movements, that renders them activist (regardless of whether or not that transformation actually takes place), rather than any particular ideological or political commitment. Elsewhere, Genz (2006, p.338) talks of the 'micropolitics' of postfeminism, which is 'not put into practice by a political community engaged in activism but ... results from individual and daily gender-based struggles'. In contrast, Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2003), writing on the UK, recognise acts committed by individuals as a form of activism, but only if they are linked to political activities aimed at changing larger social structures (such as donating money to an organisation, or voting); in this case, it would seem that some degree of political and/or ideological commitment is required.

By contrast, many ethnographic accounts of women's activism are marked by an initial *lack* of evidence of ideological (or specifically feminist) commitment, as this quotation from El-Bushra (2007, p.135) indicates: 'Where women do undertake peace initiatives, these are often based on a pragmatic response to desperate situations rather than on an inherently pacifist orientation' (p. 135). However, a more politicised consciousness may then emerge, as a result of engagement in activities to meet basic needs:

While the initial impetus for organizing may be the immediate need to pool resources to meet the survival requirements of families and communities, many organizations are later sustained by the sense of empowerment that women gain in this process, as well as by a frustration with the 'failed politics of violence' (El-Bushra 2007, p. 135).

In this case, no underlying ideological or political commitment was evident at the outset, but rather a desire to act to make life better for those in their immediate and wider community functioned as the main motivation to engage in these activities. Indeed, as Kay (2005) found in her research with women's organisations in Russia, even those groups of activists that *are* motivated by a particular ideology are often reluctant to declare this openly; the one group with whom she worked who had overtly feminist aims chose to 'hide' these behind the provision of practical support and assistance. One of my respondents made a similar point, in regard to gender-focused organisations in Bishkek:

The projects are feminist, without a doubt, but they would never use the word. Sometimes they refer to themselves as '*genderisti*' (interview with NGO leader and academic, mid 40s, 28 October 2009).

In fact, as will be discussed in chapter 6, many of my research respondents *did* identify with the label 'feminist', in one way or another, in addition to expressing a more general desire to challenge unequal power relations, shaped by gender as well as other social factors.

By contrast, when it comes to discussion of some forms of activism, for instance motivated by, or organised within the framework of, religious fundamentalism or right-wing politics, the 'wrong' kind of ideology is often presented as the sole factor determining women's agency in social or political activity, disregarding other factors that may be pushing women into a socially active role; this can be the case whether the person making the assessment is writing from a feminist or non-feminist perspective. For instance, a report on 'Women and radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan' (International Crisis Group 2009) condemns the increasing involvement of women as activists in Hizb ut-Tahrir and other fundamentalist groups, and criticises secular women's rights activists for failing to engage with these religious women and instead concentrating on the priorities of their foreign donors. In both cases, this activism is clearly motivated by the 'wrong kind of ideology', by religious extremism on the one hand, and by misplaced emphasis on donor priorities on the other. This disregards the fact that

many of the women involved in Hizb ut-Tahrir spoke of their involvement in terms of enabling their and their 'sisters' greater access to knowledge, education, and social support. Elsewhere, in an interesting and highly reflective article, Davids (2011) writes of how her own subjective position towards the right-wing politics of a Mexican politician she was interviewing meant that she was initially unable to recognise this woman's agency and commitment to women's rights: 'At first, Marina seemed to repeat her party's rather conservative and traditional discourse on gender so vigorously that it blurred my vision, preventing me from considering her as an actor bestowed with agency, thus complying with the dominant discourse' (p.156).

### **Civil society as (feminine) gendered space**

Much attention has been given in feminist and development literature to the way that activity in the non-governmental sector and wider civil society has often been favoured as a way of bringing about progressive social change by women themselves, over engagement in more formal political processes or wider social movements. Critical accounts by Lang (1997) and Alvarez (1999) note the effective 'NGOisation' of feminist activism, a question that will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 7, in relation to Alvarez's critique of the 'activist-professional'.

This association between women and activism, and between women and the civil society sphere in which most activism is understood to take place, has been particularly remarked on in the countries of the former Soviet Union (Hemment 2004; Hemment 2007; Kay 2005; ACSSC 2006b; Johnson 2009; Ishkanian 2003). Much of the literature draws attention to, and critiques, the implicit – or sometimes explicit – link often drawn between women's caring responsibilities within the home and their activism on behalf of disadvantaged groups, particularly if such activism occurs at the local level. This includes challenging the underlying problematic, essentialist assumption that women are somehow 'naturally' better at social activism than men, or at least, that their motivations are more wholesome and more rooted in their immediate environment and experiences (Hemment 2004; Hemment 2007; El-Bushra 2007; Cortez Ruiz 2005; Martin et al. 2007).

In her 2007 article 'Feminism, gender, and women's peace activism', El-Bushra lauds the fact that attention is finally being paid to the vital work that women have long undertaken in conflict transformation and peace-building in post-conflict situations – most of which has historically been ignored in formal peace settlements and post-conflict reconstruction programmes. But she is wary of the way that so much of this peace activism is centred on the concept of women as mothers, as 'natural' nurturers and peace-builders. This is typified by the kind of language found in a report published on 'Gender aspects of conflict prevention' in Kyrgyzstan, which draws attention to the need to recognise women's activism in peace-building and conflict resolution on the grounds that



‘women, especially mothers, due to their “special predestination”, are the opponents of violence and war, and, due to their social and cultural characteristics, they are more capable of peacekeeping activities’ (UNDP 2003, p. 5). El-Bushra argues that this has profound, negative implications for women’s potential engagement in formal political processes:

The problem is that women’s role as mothers provides them with a platform on which to approach and appeal to powerful men (an example perhaps of ‘the power of the powerless’), but it simultaneously undermines their desire to be taken seriously as political players (El-Bushra 2007, p. 140).

This ‘women’s activism’ may bring about very real and positive social change, but the danger is that it may serve effectively to reinforce women’s exclusion from formal political processes, or make it only possible for them to speak out on narrow platforms deemed in keeping with their ‘feminine’ interests (El-Bushra 2007; Rai 2002. See also Martin et al. 2007). In another example, writing on gender and globalisation, Davids and Van Driel (2009, p.909) highlight the way that women from the global South are simultaneously presented as globalisation’s ultimate victims *and* as instrumentalised activists ‘called upon to awaken and resist globalisation’. Meanwhile Cornwall et al. (2008) include three qualities often promoted as reasons why women make better social activists – their assumed inherent peacefulness, empathy with the environment, and refusal to engage in corruption – in their list of ‘gender myths’ that have emerged in development.

Writing on civil society and women’s activism in provincial Russia, Hemment (2004; 2007) is highly critical of the effective ghettoisation of women in civil society. In her view, because they were effectively excluded from the formal political arena in Russia following the collapse of communism, women who wished to play a role in influencing society and social change had little choice but to become engaged in NGOs. Donor support, she argues, has served to facilitate and perpetuate this ‘gendered distribution of power and resources’ (Hement 2004, p. 217), with women civil society actors both the targets and the agents of development assistance (see Rai 2002; Fioramonti 2004). But at the same time, while noting the exclusion of women from the formal political arena, Hemment admits that many women were drawn to civil society precisely *because* it was not seen as ‘politics’: ‘The market and formal politics were widely regarded as dirty, but also as masculine domains.... In contrast, in these constructions the non-governmental sphere was seen to be decent, moral, and in this way peculiarly feminine’ (Hement 2004, p.227).

In the introduction to their edited volume on theorising NGOs, Bernal and Grewal (2014a) expand upon this idea in greater detail. They argue that the particular status of the NGO – ‘official and unofficial ... state-linked, yet nonstate’ – give the NGO form resonance with (certain kinds of)

feminism<sup>14</sup> (Bernal & Grewal 2014a, p.9), in the context of the gendered division between the public and private spheres. They argue that with the underrepresentation (or exclusion) of women in official positions and the public political space, the NGO is a recognisable – and recognised – platform ‘from which to make claims by and for women, and to legitimately represent them’ (Bernal & Grewal 2014a, p.8).

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In this chapter, I have set out the theoretical framework that shapes this research, focusing on the theories of citizenship, civil society, and gender as a development concern that not only provide the basis for my own investigations, but also the rhetorical and policy framework within which my research respondents were operating. In chapter 4, I will go on to look at how these policy frameworks were realised on the ground in the Kyrgyz Republic, and how my research respondents engaged with, and experienced them, in their role as ‘active citizens’ operating within the non-governmental sector.

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<sup>14</sup> Principally, liberal feminism.

### 3. Gender and development in Soviet Kyrgyzstan

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In this chapter, I consider the position of women in pre-Soviet Central Asia, and present the gendered impacts of the Soviet development project in the Central Asian Socialist Soviet Republics, with particular reference to the Bolshevik campaigns in the 1920s to ‘liberate’ Central Asian women and the drive during the Stalinist period to bring women into the labour force. I then discuss the gendered social contract that emerged in the later Soviet period, focusing on the experiences of women in the Kyrgyz SSR itself. Finally, I assess the gendered impacts of the collapse of the Soviet state, and the transition to a market economy. I argue that 70 years of Soviet social policy regarding women and the Soviet mission to develop Central Asia resulted in a very particular ‘gender regime’<sup>1</sup> and gendered settlement between the people and the state at the time of Kyrgyzstan’s independence in 1991. The way that this settlement was so suddenly and violently ruptured affected (and continues to affect) the way that my research respondents (and others) have subsequently engaged with the ‘new’ ideas of citizenship, civil society, and gender equality that were introduced by international organisations arriving in the country in the 1990s, as will be considered in subsequent chapters.

#### **Women in pre-Soviet Central Asia**

The state that is now the Kyrgyz Republic has existed as a separate, bounded entity since 1924, when it was created as an autonomous region within the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (established in 1918). It then became an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1926, and the Kyrgyz Socialist Union Republic of the Soviet Union (a ‘full’ republic) in 1936.<sup>2</sup> Prior to this, the area had been incorporated into the Russian empire between 1863 and 1876, when the Khanate of Kokand, where most Kyrgyz then lived, was annexed by the Russian empire, and the Kyrgyz tribes were defeated by Russian forces. Within the Russian empire, the area formed part of a region known as Turkestan (Anderson 1999; Landau & Kellner-Heinkele 2001; Sahadeo 2003; Roy 2005; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Cummings 2012).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘gender regime’ was developed by R.W. Connell (1990), to theorise the way ‘women and men tend to occupy particular positions within the state, and work in ways structured by gender relations’ (p. 523).

<sup>2</sup> For a full account of this period of delimitation and the ‘creation of nations’, see Roy (2005) and Cummings (2012).

<sup>3</sup> For the history of the region prior the arrival of Russian imperial rule, see Cummings (2012), Roy (2005), and Anderson (1999).

Under imperial rule, Russian military governors relied on local elites to maintain order in Central Asia (Anderson 1999; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Sahadeo 2003). Corcoran-Nantes (2005) and Anderson (1999) both argue that in return, little attempt was made to alter existing cultural, social, religious or economic practices and institutions,<sup>4</sup> and that there was very little contact between the local population and Russian imperial rulers, and the Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, and other non-indigenous populations who were encouraged to migrate to the region from other parts of the Russian empire. These and other scholars have argued that as such, the colonial experience of those living in Central Asia bore little resemblance to that of people living in areas under French or British colonial rule, for instance, who were subjected to the 'civilising mission', as well as to more direct forms of labour and economic exploitation; this was particularly the case for populations living away from urban settlements (Myer 2002; Corcoran-Nantes 2005. See also Roy 2005; Tlostanova 2010). In a contrasting approach Sahadeo (2003) argues in a review essay that in fact, the Russian colonial project in Central Asia had a far more profound, negative impact on the nomadic societies of the region.<sup>5</sup> In particular, extensive contact with Russian settlers led to conflicts and tension over land, and nomadic groups were subjected to pressure to abandon nomadism and adopt the trappings of 'civilised' settled societies, including Christianity. This was particularly an issue for Kazakh nomadic tribes, most of which had been incorporated into the Russian empire by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and who were living on the more accessible steppe (in contrast to the mountainous regions where Kyrgyz tribes lived and worked), who lost pastoral land in the face of unrestrained (and often unauthorised) Russian settlement (Martin 2001, cited in Sahadeo 2003). Cummings similarly argues that the arrival of Russian imperial military, economic, and administrative institutions 'revolutionized the traditional way of life of the Kazakh nomad', particularly in regard to land use, taxation, and the selection of leaders (Cummings 2012, p. 36).

As Constantine (2007) points out, what little we know about *women* in pre-revolutionary Central Asia comes mainly from the accounts of Russian ethnographers and travellers. In the area that is today Kyrgyzstan, there was far more contact between these Russian travellers, as well as settlers and colonial officials, and the urban, predominantly ethnic Uzbek and Tajik settled populations in the Ferghana Valley (which today spans parts of southern Kyrgyzstan, as well as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), than there was with Kyrgyz nomadic communities (Hunter 1996; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). As Corcoran-Nantes (2005) argues, the limited nature of contact between Russians and the nomadic populations profoundly shaped the way that Russian rulers – and subsequently Soviet

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<sup>4</sup> The significant exception to this cited in both sources was the attempt made in 1916 to introduce military conscription, which met with mass rebellion across Central Asia. This revolt was heavily suppressed, resulting in approximately 100,000 Kyrgyz deaths. In addition, a third of the Kyrgyz population is estimated to have fled to China in 1916, where a small Kyrgyz minority remains today (Anderson 1999).

<sup>5</sup> The three texts that he reviews are Khodarkovsky (2002), Martin (2001), and Israilova-Khar'ekhuzen (1999).

reformers – viewed the position of women in Central Asia. In the urban, settled communities of the region, male control over the movement, appearance, and sexuality of women was immediately visible, in the widespread practice of veiling (in the form of the *paranji*,<sup>6</sup> which covered the whole of the face), female seclusion, and polygyny,<sup>7</sup> with the existence of such practices explained by the need to control contact between women and ‘strangers’ from outside the family group, and the significant influence of Islam in these societies. By contrast, conversion to Islam among the nomadic tribes had occurred much later – in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as opposed to the 7<sup>th</sup> – and this combined with the demands of a nomadic way of life and less contact with those outside the clan meant that ‘In nomadic communities organized around kinship networks ... men and women worked alongside each other and veiling was rarely the custom’ (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, p.36; Abikeyeva 2009; Heyat 2002).<sup>8</sup> But it was through contact with settled populations that Russian colonisers and other ‘non-Muslim “outsiders” gleaned the early perceptions of female inferiority and oppression’ (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, p. 35), perceptions which they assumed applied to all women across the region, solidifying a picture of ‘Central Asian women’ as silent, invisible, and oppressed (see also Tlostanova 2010). As I found when I began to carry out interviews, this did not fit with the historical image of pre-revolutionary Kyrgyz women and gender relations held by several of my respondents, and promoted in popular imagery and historical accounts, and which is presented as a feature distinguishing Kyrgyz society from that of neighbouring societies.

## Women warriors

In Kyrgyz history it is hard to find facts supporting the view that men should dominate over women. Women led tribes, they were warriors. They played a leading role (interview with Kyrgyz academic, female, mid-20s, American University of Central Asia, 6 July 2009).

As the quotation above indicates, the idea that historically, women belonging to the Kyrgyz nomadic tribes had greater freedom and a more visible public role than those of neighbouring societies is one that holds considerable currency today, along with the idea that pre-Revolutionary nomadic society was also overall intrinsically more equal and more democratic than neighbouring settled societies (see for example Anderson 1999; Bauer et al. 1997, and Israilova-Khar’ekhuzen 1999, cited in Sahadeo 2003). Certainly, there are some important female historical and mythical figures, including Kanykey, wife of Manas (the legendary hero whose life epic – and the *manaschi*, or bards who recite it – has come to play a central role in post-independence Kyrgyz national ideology), and Kurmanjan

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<sup>6</sup> This consisted of a cloak that covered the head and body, the *paranji* itself, and a horsehair face veil, called the *chachvon* (Northrop 2007)

<sup>7</sup> Corcoran-Nantes (2005) argues that the incidence of polygyny in the region was greatly exaggerated, principally because it was practised among members of the urban elite, i.e. those families with whom Russian colonial administrators would have had most contact.

<sup>8</sup> Constantine (2007) points out that even in what is today Uzbekistan, in rural areas Uzbek and Tajik women did not as a rule cover their faces.

Datka, who took on the leadership of the southern Kyrgyz tribes on the death of her husband and led a revolt against encroaching Russian annexation, before eventually signing a peace treaty with Russia in 1876 (Bauer et al. 1997; Anderson 1999). There is also evidence that women from wealthier nomadic families exercised considerable autonomy in private and public spheres (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, p.36, citing Massell 1974, Tokhtakhodjaeva 1996, and Akiner 1997).

Whether most women enjoyed significant freedom and self-determination on a day-to-day basis is hard to judge, given the lack of written records, and the gruelling, physical hardship that accompanied nomadic life for everyone. But regardless of whether or not this historical picture of the 'liberated', pre-revolutionary Kyrgyz woman is accurate, in my discussions with respondents I found that 'she' was a trope that frequently reappeared. This was particularly the case in positive comparisons made between the situation in Kyrgyzstan in regard to gender equality, and that in neighbouring countries, with the weak role that Islam was seen to have played in pre-Revolutionary society often identified as a contributing factor, as this quotation from one of my respondents states:

I am not saying that Kyrgyz women were absolutely free, but the nomadic way of life – Kyrgyz roamed from one place to another – women played a not-insignificant role. In comparison to Uzbeks, in comparison to Tajiks, where it was absolutely Muslim, with Kyrgyz, it was more democratic in regard to women. In our history there was even a woman ruler (interview with volunteer at a women's crisis centre (case study 1) and a children's rights centre, female, age 35, 30 November 2009).

This respondent saw a direct link between accounts of the visibility and activity of women in pre-Revolutionary Kyrgyz nomadic society and her own activity in the public sphere today, again positively comparing this with the situation as she saw it in regard to women's activism in other parts of Central Asia. Imagined or otherwise, this legacy appeared to act as a key signifier for this respondent, in terms of contextualising and accounting for her own activism.

To answer the question of whether the nomadic roots of Kyrgyz society do account for a higher female presence in the polity and the society today adequately would require considerable historical and anthropological research to try and map whether historically, the greater visibility of Kyrgyz women in comparison to women belonging to other population groups in the region did actually equate to a greater degree of female autonomy, and political power. I would argue that many different factors have contributed to women's greater visibility and presence in contemporary Kyrgyzstan in comparison to neighbouring societies. These include the fact that, as discussed below, higher numbers of ethnic Kyrgyz women were brought into higher education and the professional labour force during the Soviet period than were women belonging to the titular nationalities in neighbouring countries, establishing, effectively, a greater 'critical mass' of women in positions of

(relative) authority and power, as well as a wider acceptance of women's presence in the public sphere. While the perestroika and post-collapse period saw many women lose positions of power and authority, the fact that they had previously occupied such positions may have made it easier to push for their reclamation. As discussed in greater detail in chapters 2, 4, and 6, international development intervention to strengthen 'civil society' and promote gender equality have also facilitated this process of 'reclamation', both by providing financial and organisational support for the establishment of an NGO sector where women could, with little contestation, assume positions of leadership and authority, and by providing a rhetorical framework legitimating claims for women's autonomy and equality.

These are just two examples of factors which, along with many others, including that of the nomadic roots of Kyrgyz society, may have contributed to the greater presence of women in the polity and society of the Kyrgyz Republic today. As such, I would certainly not argue that on its own, women's greater visibility in nomadic society (as opposed to the sedentary societies in the region) provides a 'fundamental explanation' that accounts for this greater presence today. Discussion of this issue is included here only because the idea of an emancipated, strong, autonomous Kyrgyz women in pre-revolutionary society emerged as an important trope in conversations with some of my research respondents, and one which they associated with their own activism and activity within the public sphere.

## **The Soviet development project in Central Asia**

It took some years after the 1917 Revolution for Bolshevik rule to be established in Turkestan (see Anderson 1999; Cummings 2012), but by 1924, a clear policy for the development of the region had been established by the new Soviet leaders. This entailed not just rapid economic development, modernisation, and industrialisation, but also the restructuring of the societies of the region (Khalid 2007). As elsewhere throughout the Soviet Union, reconfiguring the position of women through their incorporation into education and paid labour was seen as central to this restructuring (Lapidus 1978; Constantine 2007), as the Bolshevik government embarked on what Engel terms a '[self-conscious] attempt to liberate women' (Engel 1987, p. 781).

### **Bolshevism and the 'woman question'**

While roundly rejecting the notion of 'bourgeois feminism', the need to resolve the 'woman question' (i.e. their inferior position in society) through enacting their emancipation was a stated goal of the Bolshevik revolution (Engel 1987, p. 787; Waters 1995). However, the 'woman question' and how it should be resolved were defined in narrow terms: the oppression of women resulted

from their class position within capitalist society, namely – just like the proletariat – their lack of control over the means of production, work processes, and the fruits of their labour (Fodor 2002). This class-based oppression was compounded (and enabled) by ‘backward’ traditional practices that forced women to be dependent on, and under the control of, men. As such women’s emancipation was to be realised through their integration into the formal economy and the (paid) labour force, a process which also conveniently met the demands of the rapidly modernising and industrialising Soviet economy in the 1920s and 1930s (Lapidus 1978; Fodor 2002; Ishkanian 2003; Corcoran-Nantes 2005).

In addition to realising the new state’s commitment to gender equality (however narrowly defined) and increasing the available labour force, ‘the alteration of women’s roles in society was a function of the economic and political reconstitution of the larger society’ (Lapidus 1978, p.55). In other words, creating the ‘new Soviet woman’ was seen as central to a wider project of fundamentally altering social organisation across the republics of the USSR, in order to bring about a new, different Soviet society. In the Central Asian republics, this ‘mission’ was given added urgency, given the assumptions of women’s oppression and victimisation under Islam and the ‘backward’ cultural traditions of the Central Asian societies. Here, altering the position of women in (public) society was seen as instrumental to reducing the influence of Islam and modernising this ‘backward’ region (Massell 1974; Shreeves 2002; Ishkanian 2003; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Constantine 2007; Tlostanova 2010).<sup>9</sup> This was to be achieved through a combination of legislative reform, encouragement / coercion to abandon certain practices and visible manifestations of religious devotion (principally the veil), and political consciousness-raising, combined with encouragement to enter paid employment outside the home. Such moves faced considerable resistance, placing women in the position of ‘pawns of cultural confrontation in a post-revolutionary Central Asia’ (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, p. 38).

### ***Legislative reform***

Legislative reforms relating to women’s personal status were introduced across the USSR between 1919 and 1924, taking precedence in Turkestan over *sharia* and *adat* (customary) law. A new family code introduced civil marriage, marriage by mutual consent, and equal rights within marriage and to divorce, as well as establishing a registry of civil ceremonies. In the same period, ‘traditional practices’ such as child marriage, polygamy, and payment of *kalym* (bride price) which were practised to a greater or lesser extent across the Central Asian region were criminalised. Legislation

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<sup>9</sup> Tlostanova (2010) argues that for the Bolsheviks, this ‘backwardness’ of the Central Asian peoples extended to ‘a moral and even biological deficiency’, that was embodied in the figure of the veiled ‘Central Asian woman’, coded as dirty, sick, in thrall to Islam, and ignorant (p. 139).



was also introduced legalising abortion, protecting women's freedom of movement, and equalising property rights, as well as decriminalising homosexuality.<sup>10</sup> (Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Constantine 2007; Ishkanian 2003; Engel 1987; Roy 2005; Kleinbach & Salimjanova 2007).

According to Corcoran-Nantes (2005) and to Northrop (2007), the new personal status laws had limited impact in Turkestan in the 1920s, due to widespread sabotage on the part of women and men (for instance, a mother or older sister standing in during a civil ceremony for a marriage to an underage girl, or a polygamous husband divorcing a first wife in the civil court, but then forcing her to remain on the grounds that they were still married under *sharia*), and the eventual incorporation of many *sharia* judges into the new Soviet legal system. This was evidence, Corcoran-Nantes argues, of the deep resentment and discomfort felt in the face of the imposition of an alien legal system, and the values that it embodied, which meant that local officials were often complicit or prepared to turn a blind eye to violations of women's rights under the new laws. Northrop (2007, p. 92) also proposes that this highlights the 'stark weakness of government and party organizations' in Central Asia in the 1920s and early 1930s.

### ***Hujum***

For Soviet modernisers arriving in Central Asia in the 1920s, Islam and the cultural practices associated with it appeared to be the most 'backward' feature of the region, limiting opportunities for economic development, as well as oppressing half the population (Corcoran-Nantes 2005; McBrien 2009). 'Liberating' Muslim women would thus serve the dual role of realising the Bolshevik commitment to gender equality, and freeing the society as a whole from the shackles of Islam, enabling it to progress towards a bright, socialist future. In this way, as Massell (1974) (cited in Corcoran-Nantes, 2005) argued in his influential work, women were to act as a 'surrogate proletariat' in Central Asia, to be freed through a message of liberation from patriarchal oppression, with their emancipation serving to free the entire region. Women party Zhenotdel (the Women's Department of the Central Committee Secretariat) activists, for the most part Russians or from elsewhere in the Union, were instrumental both in pushing for and implementing this approach. According to Northrop (2007), 'To most Soviet women's activists—many of whom had little experience in the Islamic world—it seemed self-evident that such a message would be welcomed by their Muslim sisters' (p. 94).

Veiling to cover the face was taken to be symbolic of the oppression of Muslim women. Accordingly, the *hujum*<sup>11</sup> (a Turkic word translated variously as 'advance', 'assault', 'offensive', and 'attack') was

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<sup>10</sup> As in so many other contexts, this relates to male homosexuality. De Jong (1982) notes that it had remained illegal in the Azeri, Georgia, Turkmen and Uzbek republics, but does not include the Kyrgyz SSR on this list.

<sup>11</sup> Also spelt *khudjum* or *khujum*.

launched in 1927 as part of a wider campaign to improve the social status of Muslim women in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Anderson 1999; Kamp 2001; Ishkanian 2003; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). In what are now Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan, its main aim was to encourage (or coerce) women to abandon the veil (Northrop 2007). Focusing on urban areas, women were encouraged to cast off and burn their veils in public ceremonies. Although many Uzbek, Tajik, and Azeri women did take up the call to de-veil willingly, the *hujum* was to have disastrous consequences, with women and girls who had unveiled subjected to taunts and street harassment (from veiled women as well as men), physical and sexual violence, and in some cases murder,<sup>12</sup> for allegedly violating the honour of their families (Massell 1974; Northrop 2007). Fear of violence prompted many women to return to the *paranji*, or to cover their faces with scarves or shawls, and it was not until the mid-1930s that use of the face veil began to decline significantly (Northrop 2007; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). In the intervening period, the bodies and dress of 'Central Asian women' were instrumentalised as a means to define social and political values, for both Soviet reformers and traditionalists, male and female.

As discussed above, women belonging to Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomadic tribes did not, as a rule, veil. As a result, they were less affected by the *hujum*, with forced sedentarisation and collectivisation in the 1930s functioning as a far more destructive assault on social organisation for these peoples (Corcoran-Nantes 2005).<sup>13</sup> But this did not stop Soviet activists from presenting de-veiling as the liberation of *all* Central Asian women, or rather, of a generic 'Central Asian woman'. In a fascinating paper on Soviet documentary films, Abikeyeva (2009) describes a film from 1930 called *Three Songs of Lenin*, which at one point appears to show a woman unveiling, from full face veil to a headscarf tied at the back of the neck (leaving her face uncovered). What it in fact shows, according to Abikeyeva, is three separate women: an Uzbek woman in full *paranji*, a Turkmen woman with the lower part of her face covered (as was customary), and a Kazakh woman (who would most likely never have covered her face in the first place).

### ***The Zhenotdel***

The Zhenotdel was responsible for bringing women into the revolutionary process and fostering their equality in public and private life (Engel 1987; Fodor 2002; Ishkanian 2003). Throughout the 1920s, in addition to their role in the *hujum*, members of the Zhenotdel played a central role in raising awareness of the new, civil legislation relating to personal status (and supporting women to

<sup>12</sup> Northrop (2007) reports that according to Soviet archival material, in Uzbekistan alone, hundreds of women were killed as a result of choosing to de-veil.

<sup>13</sup> Both Anderson (1999) and Kandiyoti (2007) argue that collectivisation had a less disruptive impact in Central Asia than in other parts of the Soviet Union, because traditional, clan-based forms of social organisation were effectively transposed with little alteration onto the management structure of the new collective farms. In fact, Kandiyoti argues that collectivisation served to *reinforce* and solidify existing forms of social organisation, to the detriment of women. Collectivisation did result, however, in mass famine in the Kyrgyz SSR in 1932, during which the Prime Minister, Yusup Abdrakhamov, tried to divert grain to the starving and was shot for 'anti-Soviet activities' for his pains (Anderson 1999).

use it), politicising women in Central Asia, and encouraging them to enter the workforce (including through practical measures such as establishing day nurseries) (Kamp 2004; Constantine 2007). While the Zhenotdel operated across the USSR, one of its three spheres of operation was specifically dedicated to liberating 'women of the east', i.e. Muslim women in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Ishkanian 2003); as a result, from 1919 young women 'revolutionaries and educators' (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, p.49) were sent into the region to 'teach, mobilize, and politicize local women, to draw them into the Party, trade unions, cooperative organizations and the soviets, and to promote literacy' (Lapidus 1978, p.66). As Ishkanian argues, the activities of the Zhenotdel were at times extremely intrusive, with members going into women's houses to encourage them to take part in propaganda-heavy social and cultural activities, and to take up employment (Ishkanian 2003). In addition, their assumption that the women of the region needed to have their grievances and the nature of their oppression spelt out for them indicated an attitude of considerable condescension (Corcoran-Nantes 2005). Nevertheless, the Zhenotdel provided active and practical support to those women who did want to divorce, for instance, or enter education and employment, many of whom were facing hostility and attacks from husbands and other family members, and found local male Soviet officials reluctant to intervene (Kamp 2004; Northrop 2007). In addition, through the establishment of women-only workshops, collective farm units, reading groups, *chaikhana* (tea houses), and literacy classes, it did so in a way that enabled women to participate without breaking the rules of gender segregation that regulated some social groups (Ishkanian 2003; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). Writing on Uzbekistan, Kamp argues that it was during the period when the Zhenotdel was most active (i.e. the mid 1920s), and as a result of these activities, that women began to look to the state to meet their welfare needs, particularly in regard to their roles as mothers and caregivers, thus laying the bedrock for the gendered 'social contract' that emerged in the later Soviet period (Kamp 2004).

Given that they were less affected by the *hujum*, it can be assumed that it was primarily through these activities that Kyrgyz women living in nomadic communities came into contact with the Zhenotdel, and by extension, with the new regime. According to Corcoran-Nantes (2005), Zhenotdel mobilisers would encourage young women from nomadic families to move to the nearest settled community or town for short periods of training – from two weeks for basic literacy training, to six months for those who would go on to become political organisers themselves. Those who had received the full six months training would then return to their homes to promote political awareness and literacy. Zhenotdel activities were later extended to include a system of travelling 'red tents', which would spend several months with each nomadic group (Buckley 1989). In this way, 'the *Zhenotdel* succeeded in drawing many women out of their isolation and introduced new

possibilities, knowledges and futures', that would later take them into schools, universities, factories, and professions (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, p. 52).

### **The Stalinist period**

The arrival of Stalin to power in the mid-1920s and his subsequent 'second revolution' of rapid industrialisation, forced collectivisation, and cultural transformation (Arnason 2000; Northrop 2007) brought profound changes in terms of Soviet development intervention in the region, which also suffered under the purges and repression of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>14</sup> In the first place, 'Kyrgyzstan' itself came into being, as the Kyrgyz SSR in 1936. Second, the region's nomadic population was forced to settle, meaning that by 1940, 98% of farmers in the Kyrgyz SSR were working and living on collective farms (Anderson 1999, p. 11).<sup>15</sup> At the same time, rapid industrialisation, particularly in the north of the republic, meant the creation of jobs in coal mining, textiles, metal working, sugar refining, meatpacking, and later, armaments (Bauer et al. 1997; Anderson 1999; Heyat 2004). Russian became a prerequisite for those wishing to 'get ahead' in the new Soviet society, and migration from other parts of the Soviet Union further increased the Russian-speaking population (Anderson 1999; Landau & Kellner-Heinkele 2001). During the same period, the idea of 'homo sovieticus' (the new Soviet man) began to emerge, alongside a contradictory nationalities' policy that served to solidify certain aspects of cultural and religious identity. The so-called 'indigenous' populations of Central Asia were 'taught the various components of "cultured" behavior: to read Marx and Lenin; to visit a doctor when ill; to appreciate modern science, engineering, and art; and to wash one's body with soap' (Northrop 2007, p.93) that would be necessary to be 'real' Soviet citizens (see also Tlostanova 2010; Landau & Kellner-Heinkele 2001).

### ***The 'woman question' is solved***

The Zhenotdel was disbanded in the early 1930s, when Stalin reorganised the Central Committee and declared that the 'women question' had been solved (Ishkanian 2003; Kamp 2004).<sup>16</sup> It was replaced by 'women's sections' (*zhensektory*) attached to other commissariats responsible for health, education, social welfare, and so on (Ishkanian 2003; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). However, in contrast to the rest of the USSR, where the Stalinist period was marked by silence on 'women's issues', greater social control, and hostility to non-conformist social relations (Ishkanian 2003), in Central Asia, efforts to 'transform and liberate' Muslim women remained an official priority (Northrop 2007; Constantine 2007). In addition, given that the Zhenotdel was the only Party organ that had managed to establish an effective presence in the more remote areas of the region, through its network of

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<sup>14</sup> This included a purge of the Kyrgyz SSR's party leadership in 1937 (Abazov 2004, pp. 58–59).

<sup>15</sup> Jones Luong (2004) and Cummings (2012) note that in the neighbouring Kazakh SSR, forced sedentarisation and collectivisation in the 1930s resulted in a dramatic decline in the population.

<sup>16</sup> Ishkanian gives the date as 1930, Kamp says 1934.

women's clubs and 'red tents', in Central Asia 'its auxiliary gender-specific operations remained essentially untouched' into the 1930s (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, p.59). In many cases, 'these structures were literally the *sole foci* of political contact and influence that the party had in the Central Asian hinterland [sic.]' (Massell 1974, p. 378, cited in Corcoran-Nantes 2005, p. 59).

### ***Entry into education and the paid labour force***

The 1930s saw the mass incorporation of girls and women into education and employment in all of the Central Asian republics, with the demands of the rapidly developing Soviet economy – as well as the climate of fear and repression resulting from Stalin's rule – arguably acting as a greater incentive for local and republic-level leaders to encourage women to work than the activities of the *zhensektory* or the public, ideological commitment to gender equality (Verdery 1996; Fodor 2002; Ishkanian 2003; Corcoran-Nantes 2005); as Constantine (2007, p.119) argues, 'women's freedom to participate in the workforce was transformed into a duty', while Kamp (2004, p.36) notes that 'women's labor was wanted on the collective farms and in new urban enterprises, and the reward for work would be access to certain kinds of welfare'. The entry of women and girls into education and employment was to alter gender relations profoundly, at least in public life.

Creating a well-educated workforce was central to the Soviet model of development across the Union – and indeed, one of its greatest achievements – and the republics of Central Asia were no exception (Bauer et al. 1997; Deyoung 2007). The basic education law of 1918 had introduced the legal right to education, and universal primary education was introduced in the 1920s, and became compulsory in the 1930s (Constantine 2007; Ishkanian 2003; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). In the Kyrgyz SSR, collectivisation was accompanied by the construction of schools (as well as health facilities) across the republic, including in remote rural areas where new settlements were being established, to enable all children to attend (Anderson 1999). At the same time, technical and specialist schools were established in urban areas, as well as institutes of higher education, and a state university and academy of sciences in each republic (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, citing Rakowska-Harmstone 1994). From the very beginning, there was no official gender discrimination or segregation at any level of the Soviet education system: girls and women entered education in mass numbers for the first time, and by the end of the 1930s, across the five Central Asian republics, the first generation of female lawyers, doctors, scientists, and engineers had already graduated (Corcoran-Nantes 2005).

Collectivisation and rapid industrialisation necessitated the integration of women into the labour force across the Central Asian republics, and in the new repressive climate, previous demands for women to remain at home and not work alongside men no longer held traction (Corcoran-Nantes 2005). That said, patterns of gender segregation immediately emerged in regard to the recruitment

of women into agriculture and industry, with women predominating in cotton growing, silk production, textiles, food production, and clothing (Massell 1974, cited in Corcoran-Nantes 2005). Gender segregation was also apparent in professional and specialised work, with women dominant in health and education (Moghadam 2000). The 1930s also saw the expansion of services to support working women with children, principally in the form of crèches and kindergartens, although in Central Asia, demand for kindergarten places always outstripped supply, throughout the entire Soviet period (Corcoran-Nantes 2005). This along with legislation entitling women with children to long periods of maternity leave had the eventual effect of cementing women's identities into the dual role of 'worker mother', the role that they assumed within the emerging Soviet social contract, and which profoundly shaped the way gender equality came to be understood – and experienced – across the Soviet Union in the post-Stalinist period.

## **Gender equality in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union**

The period from Stalin's death in 1953 until the death of Brezhnev in 1982 saw the emergence of an unspoken, but clearly defined 'social contract' between Soviet citizens and the state. This social contract that emerged was shaped significantly by gender, as well as by nationality, language, and physical location.

### **Soviet 'citizenship' and the Soviet social contract**

As Jones Luong notes, a totalitarian view of the Soviet state and its assumed dominance of all 'levels of administrative, coercive, and legal control (in other words, the state) as well as every facet of individual and group activity (that is, society)' was particularly pronounced in sovietology literature assessing Central Asia produced before 1991 (Jones Luong 2004, p.8). But as Jones Luong goes on to argue, this assumption has since been challenged by scholars conducting empirical research in the Central Asia and the wider post-socialist region since 1991.

Explorations of internal resistance and sabotage often point to the privatisation of religious and cultural practice, which moved from the public to the private, domestic sphere<sup>17</sup> (Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Kandiyoti 2007; Pétric 2005. See also Heyat 2002, in reference to Azerbaijan), and to the turning away from the state towards friendship and kinship networks, in order to secure goods and services (Shreeves 2002; Jones Luong 2004; McMann 2004), such as difficult to obtain foodstuffs, or

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<sup>17</sup> The representation of the private, domestic space as a sphere of freedom and resistance against the repressive socialist state (Sharp 1996; Hvoslef 2001; Baiburin 2009) is problematic from a feminist perspective, not least because it ignores the extent of domestic violence against women that is now known to have been taking place in Soviet homes. As will be discussed in greater detail below, in regard to the Kyrgyz SSR and the other Central Asian republics, it also serves to mask the extent to which the strong association that came to be made between 'home' and 'culture' in the face of the encroaching Soviet state served to reinforce and solidify gender and age hierarchies, in the name of preserving cultural and religious identity (Kandiyoti 2007).

advancement on a housing list, or a child's place at a kindergarten. Related to the latter point, it is also pertinent to point out that the Soviet state invariably promised its citizens far more than it was able to deliver, with the inadequate provision of childcare being a case in point (Verdery 1996; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). As Verdery states in her influential work on post-Soviet societies, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*, the idea of the Soviet Union or any other '... autocratic, all-powerful state inexorably imposing its harsh will on its subjects' is a myth (Verdery 1996, p.20. See also McMann 2007).

However, despite these caveats, it is fair to say that in the Soviet Union, a particular 'citizenship regime' (Humphrey 1999) did emerge, centred on the unwritten but acknowledged 'social contract' between the citizen and the state, whereby Soviet citizens understood what was expected of them by the state, and what claims they could make on the state in return. This 'citizenship regime' was facilitated by features such as the promotion of Russian as the common language in the USSR and a gradual 'Russification' of non-Russian societies (Zaslavsky 1994; Anderson 1999; Hvosllef 2001; Edgar 2007; Dave 2004. See also Scott 1998), the central role given to socialisation (*vospitanie*) in the Soviet education system (Arnason 2000; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Deyoung 2007), and the dependency of people on their place of employment for gaining access to social and welfare benefits (Bauer et al. 1997).

### ***The Soviet social contract***

The unwritten social contract that crystallised in the latter half of the Soviet period encompassed a wide range of social and economic rights, including right to employment, subsidised housing, childcare, and leisure activities, as well as universal education and healthcare, and social welfare provision, as this remark from one of my respondents indicates:

... in the Soviet Union, everything was clear, regulated. Well, you finished university, school, pioneers, all of that. There was no unemployment. [...] There were a lot of [job openings]. When you went onto your pension you knew that that pension, that the state would help you, and that you could survive on that, that you wouldn't end up on the street[.] There was more social guarantee (interview with director, women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 63, 11 December 2009).

These social and economic rights were far more comprehensive than those accorded citizens anywhere else, including people living under the post-World War II social welfare regimes of Northern Europe (Yuval-Davis 1997). But as the quotation above hints, in return for this 'social guarantee', the social contract also acted as a key instrument of social control: '... everything was ... regulated'. As Jones Luong puts it, what developed in the Soviet Union was 'a social contract in which society offered the state political quiescence in exchange for cradle-to-grave welfare' (Jones Luong 2004, p.2). The 'social contract' and the comprehensive social welfare through which it was

institutionalised also 'endlessly extended a logic of responsibility for, and state regulation of, society and populations' (Kotkin 2001, p.160, cited in Kamp 2004, p.34), giving it a profoundly disciplinary aspect, particularly in regard to regulating women's identities and roles.

In addition, the rights that an individual Soviet citizen could expect to enjoy under the social contract were not universal, despite claims that all Soviet citizens were equal. Rather, they were determined by a range of factors, including gender, language, and location (see Yuval-Davis 1997; Mayer 2000; Caiazza 2002; Fodor 2002; Kamp 2004; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Seckinelgin 2006). As Fodor (writing in the context of Hungary) argues, '[p]eople made claims to the state and participated in social life through ascribed membership in [certain] social groups, the members of which were assumed to have similar problems, characteristics, and tasks in building worldwide communism' (Fodor 2002, p.423). For those belonging to the social group 'women', those assumed problems, characteristics, and tasks were linked to their ascribed dual role as 'worker-mothers', an identity that came with a clearly defined set of duties (to fulfil their 'socialist duty' (Kamp 2004, p.37) to work *and* have children), but also of rights and entitlements to enable them to fulfil this dual role (Haney 1999; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Rudd 2000; Fodor 2002).<sup>18</sup> These included cash payments (for each child in low-income regions of the USSR, including the Central Asian republics<sup>19</sup>), extended maternity leave, the right to take time off when children were sick, and access to heavily subsidised childcare, as well as 'protection' from work in certain dangerous (but well-paid) roles and industries (Sidorova 1975; Kamp 2004; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; McMann 2007).

### **'Worker-mothers'**

Women perform a special social function: not only do they work together with men in the sphere of social production ... but they also have [a] special role in the 'production of human beings themselves'. Large-scale capitalist production was the first to create an acute conflict between a woman's professional labour and her maternal functions. This contradiction is resolved in socialist society which recognises that maternity is a woman's most important social function and not her private business, and solves the extremely complex problem of involving women in professional and socio-political activity without encroaching on their motherhood (Sidorova 1975).

In official propaganda and state legislation, women were specifically represented as 'worker-mothers', with no corresponding 'worker-father' figures; indeed, none of the benefits available to working mothers were available to working fathers, except in certain exceptional circumstances (Haney 1999; Fitzpatrick 2006). At the same time, with the 'family unit' considered to be the

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<sup>18</sup> See Kamp (2004) for a discussion of feminist scholarship dealing with welfare regimes in other state systems. Kamp argues that this literature focuses on 'the reproduction of patriarchal relations within welfare systems, reveals women's roles in the creation of welfare systems, or portrays women's strategies of resistance as they manipulate those systems' (p. 32).

<sup>19</sup> This rule was introduced in 1974. In more wealthy parts of the Soviet Union, child subsidies were only paid for the fourth (and any subsequent) child (Kamp 2004).



smallest cell of Socialist society (Einhorn 2008), despite some official rhetoric regarding the need to ensure the 'equal distribution of housework ... as a very important, and at the same time, temporary measure pending the maximum automation of the service industry' (Yankova 1975, p. 115), little attempt was made to challenge existing gender regimes within the household, or to question the view that gender roles were the result of biological determination. This meant that domestic and reproductive labour continued to be viewed as the exclusive and 'natural' responsibility of women, leading to the notorious 'triple burden' of waged labour outside the home, unpaid domestic labour within the home, and social and political participation (Sharp 1996; Franz 2003).<sup>20</sup> It also meant that women's paid labour was assumed to be inferior, as it was always assumed to be compromised by their domestic responsibilities (Fodor 2002).

The emphasis placed on the idea of the 'worker-mother' also serves to draw attention to the centrality of paid work, and belonging to a workplace, to the Soviet social contract. Work was seen as the main vehicle of self-realisation, and not working was not an option; in fact, it was effectively illegal under the criminal code of the Kyrgyz SSR (and in other republic-level criminal codes), under a law passed in 1959 against 'anti-social, parasitical elements' in society (Fitzpatrick 2006, n.32).<sup>21</sup> For it was through work that a person took her place in Soviet society and fulfilled her side of the social contract (Tokhtakhodjaeva & Turgumbekova 1996, cited in Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Humphrey 1999). Perhaps more significantly on a day-to-day basis, it was through the workplace, or more specifically, the trade union that was attached to that workplace, that she gained access to the full range of social services and benefits to which – as a *worker-mother* – she was entitled, from housing to childcare, from access to land plots to grow vegetables (in rural areas) to a month's holiday in a sanatorium in the summer (Bauer et al. 1997; Kandiyoti 2007; Salmenniemi 2008). This was the case whether someone worked for a university, at a factory, or on a collective farm. But once again, because of the different gendered social rights that they were entitled to, and the different services that they were expected to use, women and men engaged with the work unit very differently (Shreeves 2002). It would be wrong to say that for all women in the Soviet Union, the primary function of 'work' was to provide access to a workplace and the services and benefits that came with

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<sup>20</sup> The use of the term 'triple burden' varies. Most often, it is in fact used to describe the troika of paid work, housework, and childcare (Einhorn 1993; Haney 1999; Galligan & Clavero 2008). Elsewhere, Johnson (2009) uses it to describe paid work, domestic work, and the endless drudgery of 'procuring goods through long lines at multiple stores and through social networks' (p. 25), while Kandiyoti (2007) refers to rural women's resentment at having to perform 'socially useful labour' on top of agricultural work and domestic work (p. 608). Other commentators (e.g. Akiner 1997; Constantine 2007) refer only to a 'double burden' of housework and paid work outside the home.

<sup>21</sup> Fitzpatrick reports that there were some cases of women in the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) who were staying at home to look after very young children (often because of a lack of state childcare) being accused of 'parasitism' under a similar law passed in the RSFSR in 1961. No-one in this position appears to have actually been imprisoned, however, and there were arguments made that the care of young children constituted 'socially useful work' (Fitzpatrick 2006, p. 405). Fitzpatrick does not provide any information as to whether there were any such cases in the Kyrgyz SSR.

it, because that would ignore the importance that many women placed on their careers and the satisfaction that they gained from working (as anywhere else in the world). However, the importance of the workplace as provider of social welfare and as the main conduit for women's relationship with the state cannot be underestimated.

### **Those who did not fit**

In chapter 5, consideration of the relations between different NGOs working on gender issues in Kyrgyzstan reveals a divide between those groups considered 'mainstream' (working on what have come to be seen since 1991 as 'traditional' women's issues, such as reproductive rights, women's employment and political participation, and violence against women) and those considered 'alternative' (such as religious groups, disabled women's groups, and sexual rights groups). While this divide is policed from both sides, with 'alternative' groups at pains to underline how different they are, on the side of the mainstream groups, arguments have been made regarding what – and whose – activities should be included in the 'women's movement' of Kyrgyzstan (see Moldosheva 2007).

As will be discussed in chapter 5, there are of course many different factors contributing to this tension and the maintenance of this divide, not least concerns about (further) alienating certain sections of Kyrgyzstani society by appearing too radical, competition for funding, and, in the case of attitudes to 'alternative' groups working with and on behalf of sex workers, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, drug users, or people living with HIV, a certain distaste and hostility. However, I would argue that it is possible to trace the marginalisation of some of these groups – both within the NGO sector and wider society – to their inability to 'fit' into Soviet society and the citizenship regime in place.

### ***Disability in the USSR***

The Soviet social contract was premised on the idea that in return for labour (reproductive as well as productive, in the case of women), Soviet citizens could claim certain social and economic rights from the state, and could take their place as visible members of the society. In the case of *disabled* Soviet citizens, however, in effect a different social contract was in operation, one that (in theory) provided a considerable amount of state support (in the form of special education and residential facilities, and state pensions) in return for invisibility and the silencing of any claims on the part of disabled people to a place in Soviet society (Phillips 2009; Dunn & Dunn 1989).

By the 1980s, the Soviet Union had the largest system of special education in the world, designed to meet the educational needs of children with a range of learning and physical disabilities and to equip them, where possible, with the skills to allow them to be productive in adult life. Children with

moderate to severe learning difficulties were offered education at residential schools, where they were supposed to receive vocational training. Those with moderate to severe physical disabilities were also educated in separate vocational residential or extended day schools. Once they had reached adulthood, people with disabilities would either be moved to an adult residential home (sometimes attached to a factory or workshop), or provided with support to find work and somewhere to live independently (Madison 1989; Dunn & Dunn 1989).

In reality, Soviet special education was highly medicalised, parents were often given little choice as to whether or not they wanted to consign their child to an institution (invariably presented as the best option for the child), and outside of the European Soviet republics (i.e., including the Kyrgyz SSR), provision of schools for children with learning difficulties and rehabilitation facilities for adults were insufficient (Dunn & Dunn 1989). ‘Defectology’ (*defektologia*)<sup>22</sup> – the label given to the discipline of studying disability and working with special needs children, and which was premised on the idea that such children should live and be educated separately in order that their ‘defects’ could be treated – helped to cement a deep stigma around persons with disabilities, increasing the likelihood that parents would opt to institutionalise disabled children, in the face of shame and ostracism (UNICEF 2005).

The vocational training (and support to work-age adults) was often unsuitable, both for the person receiving it and for obtaining work, condemning those with disabilities either to a life in residential care or poverty on a state pension (which was not enough to live on, even at the highest ‘class 1’ level<sup>23</sup>). Residential homes for adults housed the destitute elderly and physically disabled, as well as adults with moderate and severe learning difficulties, and thus could hardly have provided adequate facilities for all three groups. *Samizdat* (self-published, underground) accounts from the 1970s and 80s recall appalling conditions in these facilities, with inadequate staffing and mistreatment and neglect of residents (Raymond 1989; Dunn & Dunn 1989. See also Madison 1989).

In addition, such accounts also point to the lack of support available to enable disabled people to work and live independently (Dunn & Dunn 1989; Madison 1989). Fitzpatrick recounts how people with disabilities who were unable to survive on their state pensions often had to resort to begging or work in the informal economy (because they could not find work), which left them vulnerable to charges under the laws against ‘anti social parasites’ (Fitzpatrick 2006, pp. 404–405). Housing adapted to the needs of people with physical disabilities was not routinely available, and neither was

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<sup>22</sup> See UNICEF (2005, p.39) for a discussion of the discipline of ‘defectology’.

<sup>23</sup> This classification of physical disabilities into three categories of severity is still in place today in the Kyrgyz republic. One of my research respondents, the director of a disabled women’s rights organisation, recounted that it was technically illegal for those with a class 1 disability to work (interview with director, disabled women’s organisation, female, mid-50s, 24 March 2010).

equipment to enable them to be mobile (Raymond 1989). Disabled people writing in to a magazine and participating in surveys in the 1980s also recounted facing loneliness, and hostility and rejection from able-bodied Soviet citizens, particularly in rural areas, something which was exacerbated by the poverty and poor conditions in which many disabled people lived (Dunn & Dunn 1989). The fact that children with disabilities were educated (and lived) separately from able-bodied children no doubt contributed to this rejection, as most people had no experience of interacting with disabled people, resulting in the proliferation of fear and negative attitudes (Phillips 2009). As such, it appears that disabled Soviet citizens lived lives that were highly marginalised, and invisible to the able-bodied majority.

In my interview with the director of a disabled women's rights organisation, it became apparent that she and the women and girls that her organisation supports continue to face attitudes on the part of their fellow citizens that reinforce their marginalisation and underline the extent to which they were seen as not 'fitting' into the wider society. The director talked of disabled women being hidden away by their families, and discouraged from leaving the house. She talked of how her and her husband's attempts to adapt the entrance to their ground floor apartment had resulted in her being arrested in a dawn raid (she was later released without charge), and of how able-bodied colleagues had assumed that her physical disabilities were also indicative of mental impairment. In particular, the director spoke of families' efforts to control and deny disabled women's sexuality and (potential) maternity:

And [this girl], well she also has [something wrong with her back], and walks with crutches. [...] She wanted to get to know a boy, and her mother threw her out, several times. She came to see me ... and said, 'what should I do?' And I really didn't know. And then it turned out that she was pregnant, and they threw her out, they didn't want her to give birth (interview with director, disabled women's organisation, female, mid-50s, 24 March 2010).<sup>24</sup>

This activist also spoke at great length of the deprivations under which many disabled people were living in the Kyrgyz Republic. As will be discussed in chapter 5, to some extent, this marginalisation extended to the way the organisation that she led was viewed by wider civil society, and the way that she engaged with other NGOs. Elsewhere, a 2005 report by UNICEF found on-going high rates of institutionalisation of special needs children in Kyrgyzstan (especially those from large and / or single parent families), and that conditions in some residential schools for disabled children were extremely poor (UNICEF 2005). Katsui (2005), writing on disability in Central Asia, notes that adults with disabilities continue to face discrimination, poverty, and isolation (either confined to institutions or to their homes), and are ignored by the wider society.

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<sup>24</sup> I heard a similar account from a young disabled women activist whom I got to know socially, whose family were trying to dissuade her from marrying and having children, on the grounds that her offspring might also be disabled.

### ***'There was no sex in the Soviet Union'***

This statement<sup>25</sup> was repeated to me in several conversations as typifying official attitudes to sex and sexuality during the Soviet period. Officially, after a brief period following the October revolution when open discussions of sex and sexuality were (to some extent) encouraged, sexuality in general effectively became a taboo subject (Ruthchild 1983; Heller 2007), while *homosexuality*<sup>26</sup> was considered to be a form of sexual deviance and a marker of mental ill-health that had no place in 'healthy' Soviet society (de Jong 1982).

The Soviet Union had in fact been one of the first countries to de-criminalise male homosexuality in 1918 (Douglas & Mamonova 1984). However, this did little to alter popular perceptions of homosexuality as a form of deviance, and the 'ideal private life' as presented in Bolshevik literature and propaganda was 'a spiritually and politically compatible partner of the opposite sex (homosexual relations were not considered an option) with whom one could work together for the common good' (Waters 1995, p. 280; Fitzpatrick 1978). With the return to conservative attitudes to family and gender roles that accompanied Stalin's rise to power, male homosexuality was re-criminalised in 1934<sup>27</sup> (under Article 121 of the Soviet criminal code), and remained a criminal offence until the collapse of the Union in 1991 (Fitzpatrick 1996; Baer 2005; Martinez 2012). As in many other contexts, female homosexuality was never criminalised, but was effectively pathologised, and considered to be a form of mental illness (Douglas & Mamonova 1984; Kuntsman 2009). In Kyrgyzstan itself, male homosexuality was de-criminalised in 1997, although as Moldosheva notes, 'sodomy' and 'lesbian vice' (which seems to equate to forced sexual contact between two women or an adult woman and an underage girl) can still be considered as evidence of a crime (Moldosheva 2012, p. 12). As the work of the LGBT rights group that I use as one of my case studies has revealed, popular (and in some cases official) attitudes towards homosexuality continue to be characterised for the most part by ignorance, hostility, and in some cases disgust (see Human Rights Watch 2008; Moldosheva 2012).

By all accounts, as with disability, the experience of homosexuality during the Soviet period was predominantly one of shame and marginalisation. Of course, (able-bodied) people who were

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<sup>25</sup> It is the paraphrasing of a statement attributed to a Soviet dissident taking part in a US/Russian televised discussion programme during the perestroika period. The programme, called 'Citizens' Summit', took place in 1985, and was a live link-up between ordinary citizens of Leningrad and Seattle. The woman was apparently answering a question on sexual violence on Soviet television, however the latter part of her answer, 'There is no sex in the Soviet Union ... on TV' was drowned out by applause and laughter (see <http://russiamedia.ru.com/prominent-russians/politics-and-society/vladimir-posner/>, accessed 22 April 2013).

<sup>26</sup> In this section, I purposefully use the term 'homosexual' rather than 'gay', 'lesbian', or LGBT (apart from referring to a respondent from my third case study group). In a 2007 article, Heller argues that 'gay and lesbian identities have no formal history of existence' in the former Soviet Union, prior to the early 1990s and contact with LGBT (or rather LGB, in that era) activists from other parts of the world (p. 208). On reflection, I am of the same opinion.

<sup>27</sup> Some accounts give this date as 1933, e.g. de Jong (1982) and Kuntsman (2009).

homosexual could work and obtain the economic and social benefits accorded to other Soviet citizens, but that was at the cost of suppressing their sexual identity; that, as it were, was their 'social contract'. It was effectively impossible to be openly homosexual, as to do so risked losing one's job, social ostracism, imprisonment (for men), or incarceration in a psychiatric hospital (for women and men) (Douglas & Mamonova 1984; Engel & Lipovskaia 1989; Heller 2007; Kuntsman 2009). There was a particular focus in popular and official discourse regarding the 'threat' posed by homosexuals to children<sup>28</sup> (de Jong 1982). In addition, as Baer (2005) recounts, the criminal charge of male homosexuality (and resulting imprisonment, which could be up to five years) was also used as a means of silencing voices critical of the Soviet regime (see also de Jong 1982). Relationships between women were more likely to pass 'under the radar',<sup>29</sup> as it were, but on-going housing shortages, *kommunal'ki* (communal apartments), and housing policy that favoured young (heterosexual) couples with children over single people would have made it very difficult for a same-sex couple to live together (Ruthchild 1983). It was certainly impossible to organise into visible groups that might have been able to provide some mutual support (Douglas & Mamonova 1984; Weeks 1990), as one of my respondents recalled:

The LGBT movement has really changed, really changed. Because for a long time here it was completely forbidden, closed. During the Soviet period it was [illegal] (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 37, 9 October 2009).

Indeed, Cockburn (1991) provides an example of how charges of 'lesbianism' made in a national newspaper were used in an attempt to try and discredit the first independent women's conference to take place in the Soviet Union, in Dubna in March 1991. Cockburn's account gives some indication of attitudes towards homosexuality in the later years of the Soviet Union: 'The lurid treatment of homosexuality in the article drew widespread adverse attention to the conference. People in Dubna expressed fear that their "children would be put at risk" by an influx of "deviants" to the town' (Cockburn 1991, p.145).

The respondent above was the only person from the LGBT rights organisation who I interviewed who was old enough to have been affected by official, Soviet attitudes (in addition, of course, to societal attitudes) to homosexuality. Poignantly, when I asked her about her hopes for younger LGBT people, she spoke of the loneliness and isolation that she had felt as a teenager:

I want young people who are now... for them not to be afraid of who they are, so that they are not afraid and feel alone, like it was before. [You felt that] 'I am the only one, maybe there's something wrong with me'. [I want to] show to people that it is normal, that you

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<sup>28</sup> This fear of homosexuals 'corrupting' children is echoed in the 'homosexual propaganda' law recently passed in the Russian Federation (Rose 2013).

<sup>29</sup> De Jong (1982) notes that there was very little official focus on or discussion of sexual relations between women.

don't need to be afraid (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 37, 9 October 2009).

Some of the hostility, or distrust, towards the LGBT rights group (my third case study) on the part of other gender-focused NGOs may in part have emerged from this Soviet legacy of distaste for and ignorance of homosexuality. Indeed, as discussed by Ruthchild (1983), Douglas and Mamonova (1984), and Cockburn (1991), hostility towards women who were openly lesbian seems to have been a feature of the dissident feminist and women's groups that began to emerge in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. However, as will be addressed in chapter 5, the LGBT rights group's position of marginalisation and exclusion was in fact more complex, and contingent, than this straightforward inclusion / exclusion dichotomy would suggest.

## **Gender equality and the gendered social contract in the Kyrgyz SSR**

Here feminism, well that is the liberation of eastern women, as we can say ... well it was very cunning. The man just handed over his work, his workload onto the shoulders of the woman. Formally he is the head of the family, formally, his opinion is listened to. But in reality [all the responsibility for the family] lies with her. She has her pure 'woman's responsibility' – laundry, cleaning, and so on – plus she has to earn money (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 29, 12 October 2009).

The cynicism evident in this respondent's comment was not reflected in the responses of all of my respondents to questions on women's lives during the late Soviet period (based on their own experience, or discussions with their mothers or older female relatives). But the reality that she describes was. Public manifestations of women's empowerment – namely in education and employment, as well as to a more limited extent in public office – were not matched by changes at the household level (Kandiyoti 2007. See also Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Shreeves 2002; Kandiyoti 1999; Kamp 2004). Rather, institutions in place to support women's activity in the public sphere, and the way employment and work units (as discussed above) were structured in fact served to reinforce and uphold the existing gender regime, as well as hierarchies based on nationality, language, and geographical location. This was evident in education, employment, the provision of social welfare, and public life.

### **Education**

By the time the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, literacy levels for women and men in Kyrgyzstan were over 95% and more women than men had completed higher education. In comparison to women in the other Central Asian republics, women in Kyrgyzstan were better educated and were employed in greater numbers in scientific and research posts, many working in the high-technology

military complexes that were based in the republic (Kuehnast 1997; Bauer et al. 1997; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Moghadam 2000).

The Soviet education system had two main goals: to produce future workers and specialists to meet the needs of the Soviet economy, and to 'sovietise' children and young people through a specific programme of 'social upbringing' (*vospitanie*), that was imbued with the principles of socialist ideology and practice (Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Deyoung 2007. See also Arnason 2000). In terms of realising the former goal, there was a clear and specific commitment to gender equality, with a standard, broad curriculum studied by all students up to the 8<sup>th</sup> class,<sup>30</sup> after which both boys and girls were encouraged to continue to specialist secondary education or vocational training, with a view to then proceeding to university or specialist vocational tertiary education (Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Deyoung 2007). In terms of *vospitanie*, again, the ideological emphasis on gender equality in work and the public sphere more generally was reinforced. But this was not matched by any attempt to encourage children to think about gender inequality and existing gender roles within the home, as this Kazakh journalist points out:

Many of the books we used in social studies showed women performing all the household duties while men sat in the chair reading the newspaper. [...] While our mothers had important jobs and positions in their work and the community, at home they were expected to assume their duties as wives and mothers. We were never taught any different either at school or our communities but at the same time it did not mean that we were any less ambitious (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, pp.68–69).<sup>31</sup>

In addition, Soviet teachers often consciously or unconsciously reinforced existing gender hierarchies in the way that they taught and interacted with children in their care, again giving children little opportunity or incentive to question the existing gender regime. One of my respondents had the following recollection of her first primary school teacher, dating from the late 1980s:

In our class we had a lot of girls, and the teacher said, 'in this class there are not very many boys, so because of that, I like the boys more'. [*laughs*]. And she always said, every time a new girl started, 'what a shame that you are not a boy, we need more boys!' (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 29, 12 October 2009).

Across the USSR, de facto gender segregation did become apparent at tertiary level and subsequent career choice, with girls and women overwhelmingly dominant in health and education (Corcoran-Nantes 2005). In addition, legislation in place to 'protect' women from dangerous work (as mothers or potential mothers), such as working underground or with certain chemicals, effectively banned women from some (usually very well-paid) occupations, meaning there was little point in young

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<sup>30</sup> Age 14–15.

<sup>31</sup> See Moghadam (2000) for a very similar account of the 'mixed signals' that girls (and boys) growing up in the Soviet Union received in regard to gender equality, this time from Armenia.



women choosing to train for those professions (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, referencing McAuley 1981). Of those women who had undertaken technical training, some, such as this respondent, found that their skills had become obsolete by the time the USSR collapsed:

I finished school in 1988, I finished the 8<sup>th</sup> class [...] And after that I went to technical school and trained to be a technical standardiser. [...] But unfortunately at that time, as I was finishing my studies ... my specialism, well the Soviet Union collapsed, and it wasn't needed any more (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 37, 9 October 2009).

In the Kyrgyz SSR, language intersected with gender to create further barriers to women's educational and later professional advancement, particularly in rural areas (see Dave 2004). Entering tertiary education and subsequently professional and specialised employment was dependent on proficiency in Russian, favouring ethnic Russians, as well as children – both ethnic Kyrgyz and those belonging to other ethnic minorities – who lived in urban areas and attended Russian-medium schools (Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Landau & Kellner-Heinkele 2001). By contrast, in Kyrgyz- and Uzbek<sup>32</sup>- medium schools in rural areas, standards of Russian-language teaching were poor, meaning most children left school without being able to speak Russian proficiently (Rakowska-Harmstone 1994. See also Ferrando 2009). As a result, compounding unofficial gender segregation in the labour force, non-Russian speaking girls and women from rural areas would have faced further *de facto* restrictions in accessing higher education and professional employment as a result of their lack of fluency in Russian.

## Employment

INTERVIEWER: But your mum, earlier, she worked?

RESPONDENT: Yes, *of course* she worked, right from the very beginning. When she got married, she worked, she had children, and had maternity leave, and then when I was three I went to kindergarten, at that time my brother was [aged] a year and a half, and so from then onwards she worked (interview with administrator, donor organisation, female, age 26, 10 September 2009).

While the full incorporation of women into the Soviet labour force took longer in the Kyrgyz SSR and the other Central Asian republics than in other areas, by the 1980s it had reached similar levels to the rest of the USSR (Corcoran-Nantes 2005); by 1990, 46% of the adult workforce in the Kyrgyz SSR were female (Moghadam 2000, p.30). And as the emphasis in the first sentence of the quotation above indicates, for the most part, there was little question that women *would* work, and that work would be combined with raising children.

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<sup>32</sup> Uzbeks were the third largest ethnic group in the Kyrgyz SSR, after Kyrgyz and Russians (Landau & Kellner-Heinkele 2001). They are now the second largest ethnic group, comprising 14.3% of the population according to official figures for 2012 (Natsional'nyi statisticheskii komitet Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki [National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic] 2012, p. 7).

As discussed above, the work unit – or rather, the trade union attached to the work unit - acted as the conduit through which working women in Kyrgyzstan were able to access a range of services and benefits, as this quote from one of my respondents illustrates:

INTERVIEWER: But do you think that during the Soviet Union, the state helped people more than the state does now?

RESPONDENT: Oh yes! That is... Well here it goes without saying, because in the first place in the Soviet Union there were trades unions, and they [really did a lot]. [...] Well they could sort out problems with housing... It was a lot simpler because there was just a queue at the [work unit] where you could stand,<sup>33</sup> although sometimes it was five, six years [...] and then you got an apartment, absolutely free. There were free holidays. [...] my mother would send me off to pioneer camp for three months... (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 37, 9 October 2009.)

But as was the case throughout the Soviet Union, employment was characterised by pronounced vertical and horizontal gender segregation, with women concentrated in white-collar professions that accorded them high social status but low economic rewards, such as medicine, education, research, finance, and the civil service (Bauer et al. 1997; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). By contrast, men working in heavy industry (where women were banned from many roles) could earn significantly more. Quotas were in place to ensure the representation of women at senior levels, but despite this, men dominated in senior management, even in ‘feminine’ sectors such as health and education. Nationality and language also acted as barriers, with the majority of senior management positions going to Russian, or Russian-speaking women (Anderson 1999; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). As such, the organisation of power within the workplace along lines of gender, nationality, and language again allowed little space for the gender division of labour elsewhere – primarily the household – to be questioned.

Reflecting this, many professional women who themselves held high status jobs nevertheless prioritised their husbands’ careers over their own. One of my respondents – the director of the crisis centre (case study 1) – had had a previous, high-status career in higher education during the Soviet period, but had nevertheless seen her own career as secondary to her husband’s. Speaking about her decision, post-independence, to enter the NGO sector, she reflected:

If it was the Soviet Union, I would already be sat on my pension, that’s it. Ah... Well I had children, grandchildren. I had given my husband the chance to [develop], I was [in the background]. And then I started to think, when the children were grown up... I began to think, yes. I was already 40, and something, something was missing. It wasn’t enough (interview with director, women’s crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 63, 11 December 2009).

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<sup>33</sup> She means stand figuratively.

This career move was, in the eyes of this respondent, only made possible by the collapse of the Soviet Union (which allowed both the NGO sector to be established, and violence against women to emerge as an issue to be addressed). But it is likely that the rupture to the social order engendered by the collapse – combined with the changes in her own family circumstances, in terms of no longer being responsible for caring for young children – also enabled her to reassess the lower status accorded to her career in relation to her husband's, and to seek a 'fresh start' and embark on a second career that would be more fulfilling.<sup>34</sup>

### **Women in political life**

Quotas were also in place across the Soviet Union reserving 30% of seats at all levels of political decision-making, with the exception of the most important decision-making body, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) (Bauer et al. 1997; Corcoran-Nantes 2005).<sup>35</sup> However, it was only in the 1980s that these quotas came near to being filled. One reason for this was that membership of the Communist Party was a pre-condition for political advancement. People could only become members of the Party by invitation, and this was only offered once sufficient political commitment and activity had been proved in the Young Pioneers and the Komsomol, the Communist youth movement. As Fodor (2002) argues in the case of Hungary, women as a group were assumed to lack both political maturity and genuine commitment to the Party, as a result of their caring and domestic responsibilities. In practice, it may often have been the case that women's domestic responsibilities made it very difficult to be politically active, as the quotation below indicates:

[D]uring the Soviet period, I wouldn't have been able to, well to start something like this [*the crisis centre*]. Because then we had ... pioneers, Komsomol, Party. If you didn't make it in before you were 25, 30, that was it... 'She's old...' So you couldn't [become a member]. And women understood (interview with director, women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 63, 11 December 2009).

If indeed you did have to make it 'in' to the Party by the time you were 30, the period of intense political activity that would necessarily have preceded invitation to become a member would have clashed with the period when many women would be preoccupied with raising small children, given that marriage in one's late teens or early 20s was the norm across the Soviet Union (see United Nations 2004). In the Central Asian republics, this would have been exacerbated by high birth rates, and the fact that young daughters-in-law were at the very bottom of the gender and age hierarchies within many households, and were expected to perform the bulk of the domestic work.

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<sup>34</sup> This woman was one of only two of my respondents old enough to have had a significant career before 1991 (the other was the director of a disabled women's rights organisation in her mid-50s, interviewed on 24 March 2010).

<sup>35</sup> As Einhorn (2008) points out, the 'real' power in the Soviet Union lay solely with the leadership of the Union-level CPSU, from which women were effectively excluded, owing to the lack of quota.

In addition, across the Central Asian republics, the ranks of the Communist Party at the republic level were dominated by ethnic Russians, who were seen to be treated more favourably. This acted as a further impediment to political participation for women in the Kyrgyz SSR who were not Russian themselves, and meant that ethnic Russian women were more visible within the Central Asian political structure (Chatterjee et al. 1997, cited in Corcoran-Nantes 2005).<sup>36</sup> Beyond that, at very few points during the Soviet period were there any male or female members of the Politburo or Central Secretariat who came from the Central Asian titular ethnic groups (Corcoran-Nantes 2005).

For those women who *did* 'make' it in Soviet politics (in the Kyrgyz SSR as elsewhere), once again, gender stereotypes and hierarchies ensured that their participation was for the most part limited to certain ministries or departments deemed appropriate to their gender – arts, culture, education, and social affairs. In addition, the third secretary of the Party at the Republic level was usually a woman (Bauer et al. 1997). As such, as with the way that 'worker-mothers' were brought into the workforce, the way that women in the Soviet Union were enabled to enter political life helped to institutionalise an understanding of public engagement that was premised on essentialised assumptions regarding gender identity (Kandiyoti 2002b; Caiazza 2002), and which again favoured those who belonged to a particular ethnic group (Corcoran-Nantes 2005).

### **The private sphere**

In Central Asia in particular, the double burden was more onerous owing to the prevalence of large families, relatively low provisions of communal amenities such as crèches, canteens, and laundries, and outside the main cities, the chronic scarcity of labor-saving devices such as washing machines and vacuum cleaners (Akiner 1997, p.281).

Alongside the practical issues listed above contributing to the double/triple burden that many women faced in the Kyrgyz SSR must be added the rigid age and gender hierarchies that prevailed in many ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek households throughout the Soviet period. As the quotation below from one of my interviews so aptly illustrates, it was the young daughter-in-law brought into her husband's family's household who occupied the lowest position in this hierarchy, and who was deemed responsible for the bulk of domestic labour within the household:

[M]um was pregnant, and she came home from work, it was winter [...] the house was cold – they used to live all together [*with the respondent's mother's in laws*] in a separate house – there was no water, there was no heating, the house was cold, the stove hadn't been lit, and dad went and got water, and dad said to his younger sister 'you go and fetch water', and she didn't even get up, she said 'why should I? She's living here in our house, let her do it' (interview with administrator, donor organisation, female, age 26, 10 September 2009).

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<sup>36</sup> According to Anderson (1999), it was not until the 1970s that more than a third of leading positions in the Kyrgyz Communist Party were occupied by ethnic Kyrgyz overall.

This phenomenon is what Kandiyoti (2007) has termed the ‘Soviet paradox’ in regard to gender relations in the Central Asian republics, whereby Soviet policies on the one hand legitimated and promoted women’s visibility and engagement in the public sphere, while at the same time serving to ‘solidify’ certain cultural practices and forms of social relations that in other, similar contexts, were going through processes of change and modernisation. In Kandiyoti’s view, the combination of economic policies such as collectivisation (which resulted in great upheaval, but also reinforced existing forms of social organisation as extended family groups were transposed onto the organisational structure of the collective farm) and nationalities policies that reified national and ethnic belonging ‘gave a longer lease of life to aspects of social organization that reproduce age and gender hierarchies’ (Kandiyoti 2007, p.607). In addition, as home and the customs that could be practised there came increasingly to be seen as the ‘sphere of resistance’ and of an authentic cultural identity in the face of enforced Sovietisation, it became harder and harder for women (and men) to challenge practices that were often premised on adhering to particular gender roles (see Rai 2002).<sup>37</sup> The importance attached to ethnic identity both as a state-imposed means of social organisation *and* as integral to people’s sense of who they were (Suny 2009) meant that it was not something that could be ignored:

While *de jure* gender equality encouraged women to enter public life, to pursue careers, enter higher education and be politically active, there were few incentives to pursue a nebulous *de facto* equality, most especially in their private lives. To challenge existing gender relations, for Central Asian women, was tantamount to challenging and undermining themselves – an act equivalent to social suicide (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, p.165).<sup>38</sup>

Rather, as Kuehnast (1997) argues (based on her interviews with ethnic Kyrgyz women), the sense of a Soviet identity and a Kyrgyz identity existed side-by-side, with both providing opportunities and constraints in terms of self-realisation and opportunity (see also Suny 2009). Elsewhere, Kamp argues in relation to Uzbekistan that Soviet ideology extolling women’s role as mothers as part of the socialist duty ‘fit well with Uzbek cultural attitudes towards gender roles and did not challenge them at all’ (Kamp 2004, p.45).

## **The collapse of the Soviet Union and the ‘transition’ period**

...we had factories... for instance, KyrgyzAvtoMash, Lenin factory, and when the Union collapsed, well if you had a tractor, one part would be made in Sverdlovsk, one somewhere else. And those links were destroyed in one go, and all switched to a market economy, and

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<sup>37</sup> This is a pattern that is of course not unique to Kyrgyzstan and the Central Asian republics. For a wider discussion, particularly in the context of the involvement and subsequent containment of women and feminist groups in colonial and post-colonial national movements, see Jayawardena (1986), Kandiyoti (1994), and Rai (2002).

<sup>38</sup> Tlostanova (2010) discusses this at some length, and gives an account of an Uzbek female academic who chose to move from the Uzbek SSR to another part of the Soviet Union to live and work, to escape the impossible task of reconciling the categories of ‘traditional’ Uzbek and ‘modern’ Soviet woman.

there were workplaces lost, there was migration, and the [values] changed, it was trade and money, trade and money. And that was it. We could have saved something, and not destroyed everything (interview with director, women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 63, 11 December 2009).

In contrast to other parts of the Soviet Union, there had been no significant independence movement growing in the Kyrgyz SSR during the years of Gorbachev's reforming policies of glasnost' ('openness') and perestroika ('restructuring') leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991;<sup>39</sup> as such, the collapse, when it came, was somewhat of an unwelcome surprise, initially (Hunter 1996; Anderson 1999; Radnitz 2010). However, independence was declared almost immediately following the August 1991 coup in Moscow, and shortly afterwards Askar Akaev, an academic and former head of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Kyrgyz SSR, was elected president in uncontested elections (Anderson 1999). A period of rapid reform followed, during which Akaev was one of the first post-Soviet leaders to introduce structural economic reforms and privatise state assets and industries to 'transition' the country to a market economy (Radnitz 2010). This, combined with the withdrawal of subsidies that the Republic had previously received from Moscow and the sudden loss of the intra-USSR export market, precipitated massive rises in unemployment and poverty, and the erosion of social welfare provision and services, particularly healthcare and childcare (Howell 1996; Bauer et al. 1997; Kuehnast 1997; Anderson 1999; Cokgezen 2004; Heyat 2004; Asian Development Bank 2005; Baschieri & Falkingham 2006; McMann 2007).

### **The 'transition' to a market economy**

The 'transition period' experienced by the former state socialist countries in the 1990s gave rise to a considerable body of literature, particularly in the fields of anthropology and sociology, reacting to macro-level economic and political discussions and theorising<sup>40</sup> regarding how the former socialist countries of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe should be transformed into democratic market economies. Much of it dealt with the disastrous impacts that the economic reforms were having on the lives of ordinary people, and strategies that they were developing to survive, resist, and/or benefit from the new status quo. And much of it was highly critical of the way that an idealised 'Western democratic market' model (discussed in the next chapter) was being imposed with little regard for local realities and priorities, and in a way that refused to acknowledge, or build upon, the considerable social and economic rights that had been accorded to citizens during the socialist

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<sup>39</sup> Radnitz (2010) reports that as the Soviet state's 'coercive power' (p.55) began to weaken in the late 1980s, the leaderships in place in the Central Asian republics worked to remain part of the union, rather than calling for independence, as they had much to lose from severing ties with Moscow, and faced little nationalist opposition at home. See also Jones Luong (2004)

<sup>40</sup> See Buroway and Verdery (1999a) and Haney (1999) for a full discussion of the different theoretical approaches to transition.

period (see for example: Einhorn 1993; Buroway & Verdery 1999b; Hann 2002; Verdery 1996; Mandel & Humphrey 2002; Moghadam 2000).

Much of the transition literature focused on Russia and Eastern and Central Europe, although there have been some studies focusing particularly on the Central Asian republics and/or Kyrgyzstan (Howell 1996; Kuehnast 1997; Kuehnast 1998; Kandiyoti 1999; Kandiyoti 2002a; Shreeves 2002; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Moghadam 2000; McMann 2007). There was also a tendency to suggest that popular reactions to economic reform in Romania, say, would also have been witnessed in Siberia, or Azerbaijan, despite the fact that 'Existing socially-constituted practices, such as the sexual division of labour, ethnic work specialization, or local entrepreneurial traditions, may [have significantly affected] the way in which the postsocialist "market" [was] encountered and engaged with' (Humphrey & Mandel 2002, p.4. See also Khalid 2007). That said, these countries did go through very similar processes of upheaval, which, given the degree of homogeneity in terms of social welfare provision and the social contract in place across the socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe and the Soviet Union, probably did prompt fairly similar responses among equivalent sections of the population (e.g. workers on collective farms, members of the 'intelligentsia'), at least initially. Verdery (1996), for instance, argues that while no socialist country can be taken as 'typical', conclusions drawn regarding one society can raise questions that might be fruitful elsewhere. Hence, from this literature, it is possible to gain some insight into the enormous upheavals that were witnessed within society in Kyrgyzstan in the years immediately following independence, while recognising the role that local cultural, social, and economic processes and institutions have played in shaping subjective experience of those upheavals.

### ***Society in flux***

One idea that comes across very strongly in ethnographic accounts of this period is the sense of society being in a constant state of flux, of crisis, and of the profound impact that this had upon people's sense of who they were, and where they fitted in society: people were made redundant overnight; wages were paid irregularly, in kind, or not at all, and even if you were paid, rapid inflation meant that salaries were often worthless; laws relating to property, tax, and entitlement to social services kept changing; and fees were suddenly charged for services that had previously been free, such as healthcare (Baschieri & Falkingham 2006; Buroway & Verdery 1999a; Humphrey 1999; Haney 1999; Heyat 2004; Hemment 2007). The complex systems of food vouchers and cash benefits that had been in place to support income and ensure that children, pregnant women, and other targeted groups received adequate nutrition (reaching 80% of families in the Central Asian republics,

according to one study) collapsed or were dismantled (Chen et al. 1992; McMann 2007).<sup>41</sup> Levels of violent crime increased, leading to a decreased sense of security (Bauer et al. 1997).

These experiences of uncertainty and upheaval, of feeling powerless in the face of new responsibilities and a constantly changing environment would have been compounded by the paternalistic role that the state had previously paid in meeting the economic and welfare needs of citizens, from employment to housing (Verdery 1996; McMann 2007). In one of the first studies to assess the gendered impact of the collapse and the immediate post-independence reforms in Kyrgyzstan, Howell (1996) wrote of how analysis of coping mechanisms at the local level had revealed that 'the suddenness of the collapse of first the Soviet Union and then the Kyrgyz economy, as well as the abrupt switch to the market, [had] a profound effect on people's sense of security and their psychological capacity to adapt' (p.56) and to secure food for themselves and their families.

Given that the bulk of my respondents were in their 20s and 30s, most were children or teenagers when the Soviet Union collapsed. Some had only sketchy memories that had more to do with disruption to their day-to-day routines than more profound changes and upheavals – going to the shop to buy sweets, for example, and being sent away because they had 'old' money (Soviet roubles instead of Kyrgyz som). But others remembered this as a time of great uncertainty, confusion, and tension for themselves and their families:

[I]t was a time of crisis ... and it was really hard. Hard for our families, hard for us, so we are kind of the 'generation of the crisis time', but ... there were also many problems. First of all economic, political, that led to lots of social problems, like, you know, my father lost his job, and he was the only breadwinner.... We had hard times (interview with gender and development coordinator, international NGO, female, age 32, 29 July 2009).

In another interview, a respondent associated the time with upheaval in her own immediate family, but which she nevertheless linked to wider social and economic changes:

INTERVIEWER: What changed when the ... Union collapsed?

RESPONDENT: What changed? [...] Well my parents divorced [*laughs*]. Maybe lots of people got divorced when the USSR collapsed. Not everyone could earn money. Or they got rich very quickly, and left their old wives and found new ones, like that perhaps, I don't know (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 29, 12 October 2009).

Elsewhere in the literature, the idea of 'moral' chaos (as well as social and economic chaos) that is hinted at in this quotation is a common theme (Verdery 1996; Humphrey 1999; Buroway & Verdery 1999a). In the context of Kyrgyzstan, this is particularly apparent in the literature that has emerged

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<sup>41</sup> The exception in the region was Uzbekistan, which retained (and retains) a comprehensive system of social welfare provision. As a result, living standards fell in Uzbekistan at a far less dramatic rate than elsewhere in the region. However, the monetary value of welfare payments did significantly decrease (Kamp 2004; McMann 2007).



looking at the rise in overt religious practice since 1991, which often explores the role that religion has played in ‘filling the gap’ left by socialism and Soviet law and order, and providing security and a moral framework in the face of rapid social change (Akbarzadeh 2001; Heyat 2004; McBrien 2006; McBrien & Pelkmans 2008; McBrien 2009; International Crisis Group 2009). Echoing the reference to being a member of the ‘generation of the crisis time’ made by my respondent above, a 2009 report from the International Crisis Group on religious radicalism among young women in southern Kyrgyzstan refers to the ‘lost generation’ of people who were growing up as the Soviet Union collapsed, and of how this sense of being ‘lost’ has been one of the factors contributing to religious radicalism among younger people.

### ***Unemployment and the rolling back of the state***

As both the respondent quotations above indicate, sudden unemployment emerges in the literature as one of the most unsettling and traumatic ‘transition experiences’ for many people, particularly in the context of the concurrent reduction or removal of state benefits and services that could have cushioned its impact. Writing in the context of provincial Russia, Hemment (2007) argues that suddenly, people were having ‘... to deal with the new post-socialist phenomena of unemployment, withheld wages and hyperinflation in the absence of a functioning social safety net’ (p.46), while McMann’s conversations with farm workers in rural Kazakhstan found that unemployment was experienced as a ‘severe shock to people as the Soviet state had guaranteed employment, finding them jobs and rarely firing them’ (2007, p. 236).

In Kyrgyzstan, there was a rapid rise in unemployment in the early 1990s, particularly affecting women (Bauer et al. 1997; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). As discussed above, this had implications not just in terms of access to income and financial independence, but also to social welfare provision. As Bauer et al (1997) note, writing in a report commissioned by the Asian Development Bank on the gendered impacts of post-independence reforms and upheavals, work played such an important role in Soviet society and the citizen’s side of the social contract that unemployment also profoundly shook people’s sense of self, their place in society, and their relationship with the state.

Women raised and educated during the Soviet period place high value in being a contributing member of society. Having internalized the ideological expectations and norms of the Soviet system, many consider it a personal failure not to be contributing to the overall productivity of the country. Women (as well as men) are often embarrassed to discuss their unemployed status as they feel it is indicative of a personal failure (Bauer et al. 1997, p.55).<sup>42</sup>

Unemployment combined with a huge reduction in what the state was able to provide in terms of social welfare provision also forced people into the position of having to negotiate with other

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<sup>42</sup> See also Kuehnast (1997), Kandiyoti (1999), Humphrey (1999), and Hemment (2007).

agencies and institutions (such as new service-provider NGOs) to gain access to services, now to be determined not by right, but according to need and/or ability to pay (as will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3) (Dagnino 2007; Yuval-Davis 1997; Kabeer 2005b; Haney 1999; Kamp 2004). According to ethnographic accounts, this was a disorienting experience, and a process that brought about considerable material hardship for many people. It also meant that for many people, the state – as employer, service provider, omnipotent presence – effectively disappeared from their lives, particularly for those living in rural areas (Radnitz 2005). Although as my interviews revealed (and as will be discussed in subsequent chapters), the *idea* of the state and the roles that it should perform, certainly did not. In addition, as work by Humphrey (1999), Kandiyoti (1999; 2002a), and Shreeves (2002) has shown, throughout the 1990s, many people continued to consider themselves to be employed in state enterprises and work units long after such units had effectively stopped operating, and even when they had not received salaries for months, or even years.

### ***New possibilities and opportunities***

The period following the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of enormous upheaval, but it was also a period of great opportunity and possibility, particularly for those who were active in the community and activist groups that had begun to emerge at the end of the 1980s in many parts of the region (Hemment 2007; Verdery 1996; Phillips 2009). As will be considered in greater detail in the next two chapters, in the context of the particular issues addressed by my three case study groups, for the first time, people were able to speak out openly on a range of social, environmental, and economic issues that had previously been completely taboo, and to make contact with groups in the West. In addition, the arrival of donors (and their money) to the Kyrgyz Republic enabled the establishment of an organisational framework – i.e. funding and training for nascent NGOs – within which such activism could take place. Opportunities for new forms of activity and association in other sectors also emerged; for instance, Radnitz (2010) argues that President Akaev's (who governed 1992–2005) liberalising economic and political reforms allowed individuals who had not been part of previous elites linked to the Soviet regime to gain control over important financial and industrial assets, and to enter government.

### **The 'gender backlash'?**

[F]rom a gender perspective, the market reforms that have been adopted in Central Asia and the Caucasus, prescribed and underwritten by the international financial institutions, and endorsed by neoliberal thinkers and policy-makers in western countries, have been deeply flawed. The social costs of the transition have been far higher than expected, and the burden borne by women has been especially onerous (Moghadam 2000, p.32).

The impacts of 'the transition' on the gender regimes of former state socialist societies have received considerable attention in a wide body of literature,<sup>43</sup> perhaps reflecting the fact that the early-mid 1990s coincided with the rising prominence of the gender and development (GAD) agenda within mainstream development theory and practice (see chapter 4). Moghadam (2000) argues that among feminist and GAD specialists there was for the most part consensus in regard to the negative effects of the transition on gender equality, while Howell points out that at least in the initial years after the collapse of the USSR, women as a group and how they were experiencing the 'crisis' were the subjects of research far more frequently than other groups, such as children or households (Howell 1996). This has given rise to two generally accepted 'truths' about this period, in relation to Kyrgyzstan and the Central Asian region more generally. First, that '[women] have suffered most from the difficult economic transition' (Ishkanian 2003, pp.482–483. See also Bauer et al. 1997; Tlostanova 2010; McMann 2007), just as they had suffered the most as a result of the structural adjustment policies introduced in many developing countries in the 1980s and 1990s, in return for IMF money (Moghadam 2000). Second, that one of the reasons for this is the 'retraditionalisation' of society in the region, whereby the gains made in regard to gender equality achieved during the Soviet period have been replaced by unequal, so-called traditional gender roles, as pre-Revolutionary patterns of social organisation have reasserted themselves, and Islam has once again become a dominant force in society. A typical example of this argument is made by Moghadam (2000), in relation to former state socialist societies as a whole: 'Women's position in the new labor markets has been ... complicated by a resurgence of the stereotyping of gender roles' (p.24) and that in Central Asia 'the implications of the transition for women go beyond the labor market and into the realm of culture and national identity' (p.25). But to what extent did these 'gender myths' (Cornwall et al. 2008) reflect the reality?

It is certainly true that across the former Soviet Union, women were often the first to be targeted when state enterprises and institutes 'downsized' to meet the demands of the new market economy, both during the perestroika period and following the collapse. In Kyrgyzstan, this led to a reduction of almost 50% in the official female employment rate between 1990 and 2005 (Asian Development Bank 2005, p.xi); by 1996, women made up 59.3% of the unemployed, according to official figures (Moghadam 2000, p.32). Women had also dominated the social welfare sector, meaning that many lost jobs, or were put onto extended unpaid leave, when reforms were introduced to 'roll back the

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<sup>43</sup> For general literature on 'women and transition' or 'gender and transition', see Moghadam (1994), Rudd (2000), Mindicanu (2005). On Central Asia: Howell (1996), Akiner (1997), Bauer et al. (1997), Chatterjee et al. (1997), Ishkanian (2003), Kandiyoti (1999; 2007), Heyat (2004) Corcoran-Nantes (2005), Kuehnast (1997; 1998), Moghadam (2000), Shreeves (2002). On other parts of the former Soviet Union: Buckley, ed., (1997), Heyat (2002), Hemment (2004; 2007), Salmenniemi (2008). On eastern Europe: Einhorn (1993), Gal and Kligman (2000), Coyle (2003), Galligan and Clavero (2008), Haney (1999), Moghadam (1995), Verdery (1996), Watson (1993).

state'; those who were able to retain formal employment in this sector often found that their salaries were paid in arrears, or in kind, and that they failed to keep up with the rising cost of living. New private sector employers had little regard for existing, Soviet-era gender equality legislation, often specifically advertising posts to men only (Einhorn 1993). In addition, the closure of state kindergartens, almost exclusively staffed by women, had the dual impact of removing many women's source of livelihood and forcing others, who had previously relied on state childcare in order to work, to give up work themselves in order to take care of their own children (Bauer et al. 1997; Asian Development Bank 2005; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). Women also bore the brunt of an increased care burden in other areas aside from childcare. Najafizadeh (2003) for instance, writes of women in post-independence Azerbaijan facing an increased care burden at home, in the form of having to care for sick, disabled, and elderly relatives with little outside support, and at the same time, experiencing an increased care burden in their professional roles as teachers, medical staff, and social workers, in the face of diminishing resources and crumbling infrastructure.

Independence also saw a sudden decrease in the number of women in positions of political or administrative authority, as quotas ensuring women's representation were removed almost immediately in the drive to introduce 'democratic' reform (Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Galligan & Clavero 2008). Elections in Kyrgyzstan held after the removal of quotas saw a massive drop in the number of women elected to the Republic's Parliament,<sup>44</sup> effectively excluding women as a political group from participating in the post-independence political project and reinforcing the idea that formal political processes occupied a space that was exclusively male (Karybayeva 2004; Asian Development Bank 2005; Institute for War and Peace Reporting 2005). As will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters, this does in part account for the high numbers of women who have sought leadership positions in NGOs 'in an effort to gain a place and a voice in a changing civil society' (Corcoran-Nantes 2005, p.160).

In addition, making women redundant first was justified on pragmatic, but also on ideological grounds. Legislation enshrining women's rights as 'worker mothers' to generous maternity leave and paid leave to cover children's illnesses, shorter hours, and the opportunity to work part time now served to 'operate against their interests as employees', as it made them appear unreliable and expensive (Einhorn 1993, p. 130). And, it was argued by politicians, suddenly influential religious leaders, and conservative social commentators (not just in Central Asia, but across the former Soviet Union) that the end of socialism meant that they no longer *needed* to work and could return to their

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<sup>44</sup> Elections in 1995 saw just one woman elected to the lower house of parliament, and four elected to the upper house (Inter Parliamentary Union 'Women in National Parliaments' database, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif010197.htm>. Last accessed 15 April 2013).

‘natural’ roles as mothers and housewives, allowing men to reassert their ‘natural’ position as head of the family and breadwinner after years of ‘unnatural’, damaging, state-enforced gender equality (Kuehnast 1997. See also Sharp 1996; Verdery 1996; Haney 1999; Hemment 2007; Einhorn 2008). This followed on from late Soviet official rhetoric that had increasingly encouraged women to put family rather than career first, prompted by falling birth rates across the Soviet Union (with the exception of the Central Asian republics), high rates of divorce, and reduced demand for labour (Connell 1990; Kamp 2004; Constantine 2007). Indeed, enabling women to return to their ‘purely womanly mission’ had been presented as one of the moral imperatives of perestroika by the architect of the reforms himself, Gorbachev (Connell 1990; Cockburn 1991). In some parts of Central Asia in particular, this ‘backlash’ went beyond the matter of women’s employment, with challenges to the legitimacy of women’s presence and activity in the public arena at all coming from both the family and the community, and from religious and political leaders (Handrahan 2001; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Kandiyoti 2002b; Asian Development Bank 2005; McBrien 2006; Tickner 2001; Coyle 2003).

The way that beliefs regarding gender roles intersected with structural reforms and the collapse of the economy certainly had the effect of worsening the situation for many women in the years following independence, but to say that women overall ‘suffered the most’ is perhaps simplistic. For one thing, it ignores the fact that women belonging to existing elites (e.g. the Communist Party cadres) would have been cushioned from the worst effects of the economic collapse (although might still have found themselves unemployed), as they and their families slipped from one position of power and privilege to the next (Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Radnitz 2010). Second, as the work of Shreeves (2002) in Kazakhstan and Kandiyoti (1999; 2002a) in Uzbekistan in this area has shown, the fact that many women did manage to hang on to state employment in rural areas (in clinics, schools, and local administrations), whereas men were officially rendered unemployed as collective farms were disbanded, meant that they could often be the only ones in an extended family bringing in a cash income (even if that income was sporadic and very low), giving them a better bargaining position within the household. Third, gender stereotypes regarding *men’s* responsibilities also served to intensify the negative impacts of the economic transition for some men, as this quotation from one of my respondents illustrates:

And these gender stereotypes, well for instance, they bring [men] up, you have to be strong, you are the head of the family, you are the breadwinner. You see that everywhere, it’s how men are raised. [...] There are very gentle men, who can’t say anything, or the reverse...

Well when there was perestroika,<sup>45</sup> [they couldn't provide], they lost their jobs, or something. And women, [they were the ones who got up and found work], and then took it out on men, 'you're a rag, you are not aman', or something like that (interview with director of a women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 63, 11 December 2009).

In regard to this idea that society in Kyrgyzstan has gone through a process of 're-traditionalisation', if we take Kandiyoti's argument of the 'Soviet paradox' discussed above, then the assertions made regarding women's and men's 'natural' roles and the challenging of women's presence and activity in the public sphere following independence were the public expression of a gender order at the household and family level that had existed all along. Or rather, 'Post-Soviet gender ideologies do not represent a simple return to national traditions, interrupted by Soviet policies, but constitute a strategic redeployment of notions of cultural authenticity in the service of new ideological goals.' (Kandiyoti 2007, p. 601). Elsewhere, Jones Luong makes a related argument in regard to wider processes of 're-traditionalisation', namely that they represent strategies to legitimate and mask more modern forms of authoritarian rule across the region (Jones Luong 2004, p.19)

## Conclusion

The lack of written historical records makes it difficult to be certain as to what kind of 'gender regime' was in place in pre-revolutionary Kyrgyz nomadic societies. However, the idea that women traditionally played an active and visible role in nomadic society and worked alongside men, as well as the legacy of mythical and historical female leaders, emerged as strong tropes in the accounts of some of my respondents regarding gender relations in the Kyrgyz Republic, and their own activism. Regardless of the reality, Soviet modernisers arrived in Central Asia with a firm idea as to how 'Central Asian women' were oppressed, and how they should be liberated, which began in the 1920s with a wave of legislative reform, the outreach of the Zhenotdel, and the *hujum*, followed by the mass incorporation of women into education and employment in the 1930s-1950s.

The post-Stalinist Soviet Union saw the emergence of a clear, gendered, 'social contract', encompassing the social and economic rights that a citizen could expect to enjoy in return for her labour. For women, central to this social contract was the idea of the 'worker-mother', which saw women expected to take on the main burden of child rearing as well as domestic labour, in addition to paid labour outside the home, in return for generous maternity leave and benefits, and the provision of state-run child care. This led to women shouldering the notorious 'triple burden' of

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<sup>45</sup> It is important to note that while the term 'perestroika' (which translates as 'rebuilding', or 'restructuring') refers to the limited economic and political reforms introduced in the USSR by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, many of my respondents used the term to cover the period from the late 1980s, right through independence and into the 1990s. This is understandable, given that the upheavals that so many of them had experienced did begin in the Gorbachev period, which saw widespread food shortages and restructuring of the command economy.

waged labour outside the home, unpaid domestic labour within the home, and social and political participation, exacerbated in Central Asia by the poor provision of child care facilities and the persistence of gender and age hierarchies within most households. Women who could not or did not fulfil either (or both) of the aspects of the 'worker-mother' role (for instance, disabled or homosexual women) faced extreme marginalisation and / or institutionalisation.

The upheavals of the post-independence period and the 'transition' had profound impacts on many women's poverty, employment, and visibility in the public sphere, across Central Asia, effectively rupturing the settlement that had existed between female citizens of the Kyrgyz SSR and the state. That said, to argue that women were the 'ultimate' victims of the transition is perhaps simplistic, given that (some) men also suffered as a result of the intersection between expectations regarding acceptable gender roles and the new, post-independence political economy, as one of my respondents noted. In addition, Kyrgyzstan's independence and the changes that came with it did bring new opportunities with regard to citizen organising, and to finding new roles that had not previously existed.

This, then, was the gender regime and wider context in regard to state-citizen relations in Kyrgyzstan as international NGOs and donor organisations arrived in the region in the early 1990s. It was also in this context that the bulk of local NGOs working on gender issues still operating today were established, as will be discussed in the next two chapters.

## 4. Development intervention in Kyrgyzstan: building ‘civil society’ and supporting ‘women’s rights and gender equality’

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The early 1990s saw the arrival of foreign donor and international development organisations<sup>1</sup> to the Kyrgyz Republic, identified as one of the poorest former Soviet republics and as an ‘economy in transition’. The Delegation of the European Commission was one of the first donor organisations to arrive in 1991.<sup>2</sup> It was joined by USAID<sup>3</sup> and the Turkish state development agency (TIKA) in 1992, the Open Society Foundation in 1993, and then by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the German state development agency, GTZ in 1994 (ACSSC 2006b; Donors.kg n.d.). Many other bilateral donors and funds have followed since, including the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), as well as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). A considerable United Nations (UN) presence in addition to UNDP was also established, which remains today, as do the country or regional programme offices of a large number of international NGOs. Finally, since the mid-2000s, Kyrgyzstan has become one of the largest recipient countries of aid from the Russian Federation, both bilaterally and via international organisations (Kaczmarek & Wierzbowska-Miazga 2011; Brezhneva & Ukhova 2013).

Drives to provide basic food relief in the early 1990s, in the face of widespread food shortages and the sudden inability of many to provide for themselves and their families following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Howell 1996), quickly gave way in Kyrgyzstan to a shift in priority to development programmes aimed at bolstering the processes of ‘democratisation’ and economic transition already assumed to be taking place in the country (ACSSC 2006b, p.12). As discussed in chapter 2, this was in line with the then dominant ‘post-Washington Consensus’ that combined pressure to enact

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<sup>1</sup> ‘[International development agencies] aren’t direct donor organizations but represent a mechanism for managing and implementing policy on providing assistance to developing countries’ (United Nations 2008, p. 122). Tiessen (2007, p. 4) adds ‘[i]nternational NGOs are organizations that have a head office, usually located in one of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries’. In much of the literature on development and civil society in Kyrgyzstan, ‘donor’, ‘international development agency’, ‘international organisation’ and ‘international NGO’ are used interchangeably, to denote agencies that support local NGOs and community based groups through grants, training, and technical assistance. See for instance ACSSC (2006b) and Buxton et al. (2007). This is despite the fact that international NGOs are themselves dependent on donor funding.

<sup>2</sup> For a longer list of donors active in Kyrgyzstan as of August 2009, see Annex 2.

<sup>3</sup> According to one account published in 2002, at that time, Kyrgyzstan was receiving the second highest amount of USAID technical assistance per capita of all the post-Soviet states (Cooley & Ron 2002, p. 19).



neoliberal economic reform with demands to ensure the development of democracy. 'Civil society', primarily in the form of NGOs, was seen as central to these dual policy aims, as a means of consolidating democracy, and of providing a safety net of sorts for those adversely affected by economic transition, and no longer able to rely on the rapidly retrenching state for social protection.

The arrival of donors to the region in the early-mid 1990s also coincided with a period of great activity around gender as a development issue at the global level. UN agencies, and bilateral and multilateral donors arriving in Kyrgyzstan were committed to addressing gender inequality as a development issue in their programme, as will be discussed in the later part of this chapter.

## Accounts of 'civil society' in Central Asia

Before turning to look at how the concept of civil society has been instrumentalised and in effect 'implemented' in Kyrgyzstan, it is relevant to consider the body of literature that has emerged discussing what constitutes wider civil society in Central Asia. This includes a volume edited by Ruffin and Waugh (1999) and a special issue of *Central Asian Survey* edited by Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens (Babajanian et al. 2005), as well as work by Anderson (1997; 2000), Roy (1999; 2002; 2005), and Giffen, Earle, and Buxton (Giffen et al. 2005).

While the essays included in the volume edited by Ruffin and Waugh (1999) focus on whether or not 'civil society' as understood in the Western, liberal tradition was beginning to emerge in Central Asia by the second half of the 1990s (and what could be done to expedite this emergence), the main debate that the remainder of these works engage with is whether 'traditional' (i.e. that pre-date the Soviet period, but which are still in existence in some form or another today) forms of social organisation in Central Asia constitute 'civil society'. These traditional or 'actually existing' forms of social organisation include solidarity networks rooted in clan, tribal, family, regional, and trade networks (Anderson 1997), as well as more formal institutions such as *mahalla* (neighbourhood) committees in settled populations (i.e., Uzbeks and Tajiks, primarily), *aksakal* (elder) and *aksakal* courts, the practice of *ashar* or *hashar* voluntary, communal labour,<sup>4</sup> and rotating socialising and credit schemes (known as *gap* or *gashtak*, depending on the location) (Giffen et al. 2005). Anderson (1997), Roy (1999; 2005), and Kandiyoti (2007) have all made the argument that kinship-based solidarity networks were able to adapt successfully to new, state imposed organisational structures during the Soviet period (such as the *kolkhoz*), and were in fact *strengthened* as a result of their

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<sup>4</sup> According to Giffen et al. (2005, p.83), '[v]oluntary labour by the community for the community has a long history in the region'. It is known as *ashar* in Kyrgyzstan, *assar* in Kazakhstan, and *hashar* in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The practice is prevalent in rural and urban areas, and is primarily mobilised to repair or install shared community resources and infrastructure, such as irrigation ditches, schools, roads, and public bath houses. Typically, local residents are instructed by the *mahalla* chairman or the *aksakal* to participate

effective institutionalisation. Giffen et al. (2005), along with some of the contributors to the *Central Asian Survey* special issue (Earle 2005; Freizer 2005; Stevens 2005) consider how more recently, international NGOs and donors have begun to take an interest in utilising practices such as *ashar* and the *aksakal* system as a means of community mobilisation and participatory decision-making, while in Uzbekistan *mahalla* committees (and in Kyrgyzstan *aksakal* courts) have effectively become organs of local government.

Arguments in this literature in favour of recognising these traditional forms of social organisation as 'civil society' centre on the positive role that such institutions can play in protecting the interests of communities and their members, and on a rejection of the narrow, Western centric definition of 'civil society' used by international development actors, such as that in Ruffin and Waugh (1999). Writing specifically on the Kyrgyz Republic in 2000, Anderson notes that kinship and solidarity networks have more immediate relevance to everyday life than the activities of donor-funded NGOs. Anderson (1997) also writes of how these solidarity networks perform one of the functions of civil society, that of acting as a protective buffer between the state and the individual, while Giffen et al. (2005), Freizer (2005), Earle (2005), and Stevens (2005) all note the role of traditional institutions such as the *mahalla*, *ashar*, and *aksakal* (elders) councils in community mobilisation and recognising local rights claims (again functions of 'civil society').

In their introduction to the special issue of *Central Asian Survey*, Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens outline the differences between the dominant, narrow definition of what they label 'neoliberal civil society' (as groups and associations concerned with human rights, justice, and democracy), and a more comprehensive understanding of 'communal' civil society increasingly favoured by scholars of the Islamic world, which 'is not defined negatively, in opposition to the state, but positively in the context of the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life' (Babajanian et al. 2005, p.212). By contrast, the 'neoliberal' version of civil society has its roots in the European enlightenment, abstract ideal of individual citizenship, something which has little relevance to the societies of Central Asia, either historically or in their current make up (Anderson 2000; Akiner 2002; Roy 2002). This normative understanding of 'civil society' automatically excludes forms of social organisation based on clan, tribal, or kinship identity, as well as groupings based on a shared religious, ethnic, or regional belonging (Anderson 2000), as such constituting a form of Western cultural imperialism (Babajanian et al. 2005).

Arguments countering the categorisation of these 'traditional' forms of social organisation in Central Asia as forms of 'civil society' do so from what could be called a Tocquevillian perspective that *does* conceptualise civil society in normative, rather than descriptive (with its idea of 'actually existing'

civil society) terms, noting that while ‘communal civil society’ may adhere to some of the norms of ‘neoliberal’ civil society, such as solidarity and community mobilisation, it does not adhere to others. For instance, membership of clan and tribal-based solidarity networks is conferred by birth (or, arguably, marriage, in the case of women) rather than choice (Anderson 1997; Babajanian et al. 2005). Likewise, participation in *ashar* voluntary labour is typically the result of an order from the local *aksakal* or *mahalla* chairman, rather than being voluntary (Earle 2005; Giffen et al. 2005). As such, using *ashar* as a tool for community mobilisation serves to reinforce the existing power of the *mahalla* chairman or *aksakal*, rather than enabling participation, one of the normative functions of ‘civil society’ (Anderson 2000; Earle 2005; Giffen et al. 2005), both from a neoliberal and a more critical development perspective.

Schulte (2008a) argues that these traditional forms of social organisation in Central Asia are in and of themselves profoundly undemocratic, meaning that they cannot be considered part of ‘civil society’. They are often highly hierarchal, patriarchal, serve to consolidate the power of local elites, and are experienced as oppressive and excluding to those who are seen as not conforming to authority or to acceptable social roles (Anderson 2000; Babajanian et al. 2005; Giffen et al. 2005). This has particular implications for women’s autonomy and agency, as power structures within both informal solidarity networks and formalised institutions such as *mahalla* and *aksakal* councils are invariably male dominated, conservative, and intent on ensuring stability within the communities over which they govern. Among other things, this can translate into enforcing traditional gender roles, and limiting women’s access to divorce, and outside assistance in cases of domestic violence (Kamp 2004; Giffen et al. 2005).

Regardless of whether or not these forms of traditional social organisation do constitute examples of civil society,<sup>5</sup> the reality is that when donor organisations began arriving in Kyrgyzstan and other parts of Central Asia, they assumed that there was no ‘civil society’ in the region, and set about trying to build one up. It has only been far more recently that international organisations working in the region have begun to look upon traditional institutions of social organisation as potential partners in development, often with very mixed results (see Giffen et al. 2005).

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<sup>5</sup> On balance, I would agree that they do not, given their role in reinforcing rather than challenging existing patriarchal, hierarchal, and exclusionary power structures, rather than providing a space for ‘genuine’ participation. However, one’s position on this argument does very much depend on whether one views civil society as a normative ideal, or a descriptive label.

## **‘Civil society’ and development in Kyrgyzstan**

When Western donors began arriving in Kyrgyzstan in the early 1990s, the process of the country’s democratisation had already begun. In line with the ‘Eastern European model’ of institutional democratic transition (detailed in chapter 2), following the country’s independence in 1991, political and economic reforms were introduced in Kyrgyzstan by President Askar Akaev. These included lifting restrictions on freedom of speech and association and on the right to establish independent political parties, as well as structural economic reform and the privatisation of state assets (ACSSC 2006b; Bauer et al. 1997; Anderson 1999). By late 1994, 14 political parties had been established, and parliamentary elections were held for the first time in 1995 (ACSSC 2006b, p. 14). However, while Blokker (2011), writing on Eastern Europe, talks in terms of these countries *returning* to democracy, in Kyrgyzstan, with its history of Soviet, and before that, Russian imperial rule, there was no historical precedent in regard to liberal democratic institutions, meaning that rather than being revived, these had to be created from scratch and ‘sold’ to the population (ACSSC 2006b). Pétric writes of popular nostalgia for the Soviet Union among the people of Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s, and distrust in politicians who were assumed to be using the rhetoric of ‘democracy’ for the own gain and advancement (Pétric 2005; Koichumanov et al. 2005).

In this context, and in line with the policy approaches dominant in development in the early 1990s, and again taking the Eastern European states as their lead, by the mid-1990s, encouraging the growth of ‘civil society’ had become a central plank of donor intervention in the country, and wider region. As Chandhoke notes, ‘... the close connection between the ‘civil society’ argument and the demise of authoritarian regimes came to be perceived by many multilateral and donor agencies as a sure recipe for democracy’ (Chandhoke 2007, p.608. See also Sharp 1996; Hemment 2004; INTRAC 2008; Verdery 1996; Pétric 2005; McMann 2004). Indeed, as Pétric (2005) argues, there appears to have been near-universal agreement among donor and international organisations arriving in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s that this was the correct approach.

### **‘Civil society’ before 1991**

The assumption made by international organisations arriving in Kyrgyzstan in the early 1990s was that ‘civil society’ as such had not existed in the Kyrgyz SSR, as the communist state had controlled all aspects of social life (ACSSC 2006b). This assessment tallies with the approach of some scholars working on ‘civil society’ in Central Asia, such as Ilkamov (2005), who argues that the total control of the Communist party and state apparatus over all aspects of societal life precluded any other forms of social organisation. Earlier, pre-Soviet forms of ‘communal’ civil society (discussed above) were also disregarded or ignored (Giffen et al. 2005).

Certainly, the NGOs and other non-state organisations associated with 'civil society' as it is understood in development could not have functioned prior to Gorbachev's policy of glasnost' introduced in 1987<sup>6</sup> (and even during the glasnost' period, would have been very restricted in what activities they could undertake). In particular, campaigning or advocating on some of the issues that my respondents worked on (such as domestic violence, disability rights, and LGBT rights) would have been impossible:

At that time, it wasn't just that there were no crisis centres, but in general violence, domestic violence, [we never spoke out loud about it]. It was as it were a closed theme (interview with director, women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 63, 11 December 2009).

However, the idea that the Soviet state (in the Kyrgyz SSR and elsewhere) controlled all aspects of social life has been disputed by commentators such as Verdery (1996), Heyat (2002), Ishkhanian (2003), Pétric (2005), Babajanian (2005) and Corcoran-Nantes (2005), all of whom point towards the existence of everyday 'tensions, transformations and resistance to centralized decision making', as Pétric puts it (2005, p.321), and the claiming (in some form) of a space that was outside of the state's control (and outside the domestic sphere) in which to enact this resistance. Writing on Romania, Verdery notes that as the capacity of the centralised economy to fulfil its side of the social contract and provide for the needs of citizens decreased, concurrent acts of individual and collective resistance and even sabotage increased. For instance, factory managers hoarded and exchanged raw materials, while workers put minimum effort and energy into their work, and bought vegetables direct from farmers rather than from state shops (Verdery 1996). Informal *blat* (favour) networks based on relations of trust and reciprocity grew up across the Soviet Union, and were a primary means for people to obtain access to goods and services that were in short supply (from foodstuffs to advancement on waiting lists for housing and kindergartens), as well as to influence decision-making, in the absence of any other channel; Babajanian (2005) argues that these also 'count' as evidence that 'civil society' existed in the USSR. Writing specifically on the Kyrgyz SSR, Pétric (2005) provides the rejection of a version of the *Manas* epic produced in Moscow, and the growing prevalence of privately managed herds of sheep in the 1980s as evidence of organised, collective resistance to the centralised socialist state, and hence, of the existence of 'civil society'.

In addition, as a locally produced history of the development of civil society in Kyrgyzstan points out, there were in fact a large number of 'public organizations' active in the Kyrgyz SSR (ACSSC 2006b, p.19. See also Salmenniemi 2008; Babajanian 2005). These included trade unions, artists' and authors' unions, environmental protection societies, youth groups, local women's committees

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<sup>6</sup> The policy of glasnost' consisted of greater openness and transparency in government institutions and activities, fewer restrictions on freedom of expression and access to information, and limited rights to freedom of assembly.

(*zhensoviety*), and societies for disabled people. While these Soviet-era associations and unions were not independent of the state, they did provide people with opportunities for associational activity, as well as '[providing] people with real opportunities to give and receive help' (ACSSC 2006b, p.37; Babajanian 2005), one of the principal functions of civil society as it is understood in development. As one of my respondents recalled, this included national branches of international networks:

There was ... an organisation that was for blind and deaf people.<sup>7</sup> It was all over the world. [...] 1922 or 1923, it was established around then. And it went everywhere in the world. [...] And I am very glad that there was this, for them, because it's a very [difficult] disability, and... Here in Kyrgyzstan, we also had it, all over the Soviet Union (interview with director, disabled women's rights organisation, female, mid-50s, 24 March 2010).

While these all indicate the existence of some form of 'civil society' and civic organising in the Kyrgyz SSR, in the form of unsanctioned, or non-state controlled social and / or economic activity, I could not find any evidence in the literature on this region during the Soviet period to suggest the existence of organised dissident groups, such as were active in other parts of the Soviet Union (see Douglas & Mamonova 1984; Yurchak 2003; Babajanian 2005), and which played such an active role in the emergence of 'civil society' in eastern Europe in the 1980s (Hemment 2004; Blokker 2011). In the absence of such evidence, it is fair to say that prior to the glasnost' period, and the later arrival of international donors to the country, there were no organised dissident groups pressing for democratic reform in the Kyrgyz SSR.<sup>8</sup>

### **The perestroika and glasnost' period**

The perestroika period saw the emergence of protest movements in the Kyrgyz SSR, including the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan, which called for democratic and market reforms and claimed 100,000 members by the end of 1990, as well as 'Ashar' ('Mutual Aid') that advocated land and housing rights for internal migrants (Anderson 1999, p. 19). With glasnost' in the late 1980s also came the establishment of environmental pressure groups, political debating societies, and nationalist organisations (Anderson 2000; ACSSC 2006b). Anderson (2000) notes that these represented the emergence of 'modern' forms of social organisation that had not previously ever existed in the republic. However, there was no 'revolution' calling for democracy in the Kyrgyz SSR. Instead, independence from the USSR and political change came as a result of events elsewhere in the Soviet Union (Jones Luong 2004; Anderson 1999; ACSSC 2006b).

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<sup>7</sup> I assume that this respondent is referring to the Union of the Blind and Union of the Deaf, (re-)established in 1921 (Madison 1989, p. 188)

<sup>8</sup> I must add the caveat here that time limitations have not permitted for a review of the literature in Russian on dissident organising during the Soviet period. It may be that there is in fact evidence of dissident activity in the Kyrgyz SSR in this literature, in which case this statement would have to be revised. In addition, the likelihood that this is not an area that has received much research attention is also quite high, given the Kyrgyz SSR's position at the 'periphery' of the Soviet Union, both geographically and in terms of scholarly engagement.

It was also during the glasnost' period that the term 'civil society' (*grazhdanskoe obshchestvo*) came into use in Russian (Hemment 2004, p.218). The 1990 law of the USSR, On People's Associations, established the right to create associations on the basis of common interests, providing a legal framework within which these associations could operate (ACSSC 2006b, p.19). This law formed the basis for the 1991 law of the Kyrgyz Republic, On People's Associations, which regulated the activities of people's associations and political parties, trade unions, and cooperatives (McMann 2004). Amendments to the Civil Code in 1996 further regulated the legal status and acceptable characteristics of various non-profit organisations (ACSSC 2006b).

### **Donor-driven 'civil society'**

As Giffen et al. (2005) argue (writing on civil society in Central Asia), international donors arriving in Central Asia in the 1990s appeared to ignore – or dismiss as entirely negative – all evidence of any form of associational life as it had existed in the Soviet Union (organised or otherwise). The result of this, they argue, was the privileging of a particular organisational form – i.e., the NGO – in decisions about who should be supported financially in the name of strengthening civil society, as well as of individuals and groups that appeared to reflect Western (neoliberal) assumptions about the nature and function of 'civil society' (Giffen et al. 2005. See also Mandel 2002). As a result of the support offered to NGOs in the interests of strengthening 'civil society', in the context of Kyrgyzstan and the other Central Asian republics, Schulte (2008a) argues that a strong association grew up between the term 'civil society' and the NGOs that received financial support from external donors through programmes aimed at nurturing and strengthening democracy.

Broadly speaking, as elsewhere, the promotion of 'civil society' as a feature of both democratisation and poverty relief programmes was a central aspect of many donors' engagement in the country in the 1990s (Schulte 2008b).<sup>9</sup> And as elsewhere, this entailed providing training and seed funding, as well as finding – or founding – organisations to implement particular projects (McMann 2004). This also meant providing training in the very concept of what a non-governmental organisation was, as one of my older respondents recalled: 'We didn't even know what a non-governmental organisation, NGO, was' (interview with director of a women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, 63 years old, 11 December 2009).

Enabled by the availability of donor funding, as well as a political, regulatory, and economic framework that was broadly supportive (Anderson 2000), the 1990s saw the creation of a large number of NGOs, led by well-educated, highly motivated, proactive people – the majority of whom

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<sup>9</sup> To my knowledge, neither TIKa nor JICA include 'democratisation' as a component of their programme, although JICA does provide support to some local service provision NGOs. The same is true of Russian aid money.

were female – who moved into the sector from other professions, having become unemployed as a result of post-independence reforms (Plakhotnikova & Kurbanova 2008; ACSSC 2006b). This included two of my case study groups, the umbrella organisation (established in 1994) and the women’s crisis centre (established in 1998). The emphasis at this time was on ‘quantity not quality’ in terms of the push to establish NGOs to create ‘civil society’, and there was often little attention given to who – and what – was being funded (Schulte 2008a; Schulte 2008b). The leaders of many of these new NGOs had little experience of managing organisations, or of fundraising and strategic planning, which were activities they would never have had to engage in during the Soviet period (Plakhotnikova & Kurbanova 2008). In addition, priorities in funding shifted at an alarming rate, mirroring changes in political priorities in donor countries, the US in particular (Hemment 2004; Johnson 2009). In Kyrgyzstan, as elsewhere, this led to some groups adopting extremely wide remits, engaging in everything from environmental monitoring to health care to women’s economic literacy, and the practice of changing organisational priorities to fit changing donor priorities, rather than responding to the needs of constituent communities (ACSSC 2006b). Many groups lacked defined goals, and ‘were rather inclined to operate “from one grant to another”, in the absence of their own long-term mission or strategic programme-based activities’ (ACSSC 2006b, p.51), with some failing either to deliver the results that they promised, or to display a sufficient degree of accountability towards the social groups they were claiming to represent (Tiulegenov 2008). As a result, it has been argued that in the 1990s, NGOs as a whole inspired little confidence among the general population and state administrations, leading to the perception that those running and working in NGOs constituted an urban, aloof elite, concerned only with serving their own interests and accountable only to their donors (ACSSC 2006b; Schulte 2008a; McMann 2004).<sup>10</sup>

A counter-argument goes, however, that this assessment ignores the achievements of the sector in bringing about positive social change in the Kyrgyz Republic. Service provider NGOs have, for instance, played a vital role in providing some degree of protection to the most vulnerable groups and in pressing donors and the government for more resources and better policies on their behalf (Giffen et al. 2005; Buxton et al. 2007). Those active in ‘civil society’ constitute a very proactive portion of the population, with a high level of competence and expertise (Baktygulov 2008), who with the help of the international community have succeeded in creating a fairly critical public sphere in the country, where citizens are able to express opinions and disagreements with state policies (Schulte 2008a). Writing on NGOs operating in Naryn and Osh oblasts<sup>11</sup> in the late 1990s,

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<sup>10</sup> This perception and its accuracy will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 7, in relation to the situation of those active in NGOs in Kyrgyzstan today.

<sup>11</sup> Oblast is the Russian word for province, used across the Soviet Union. It is still used today in Kyrgyzstan, and has been absorbed into the Kyrgyz language.



McMann (2004) argues that while the societal reach of local NGOs may not have been very wide, they had a 'qualitatively significant' (p.239) impact on those people they did reach, in terms of facilitating their access to services, credit, and training opportunities.

That said, building the capacity of 'civil society' has not resulted in significant impacts in terms of poverty reduction at the national level. Nor has it acted as the magic formula to bring about the seamless transition to democracy and a functioning market economy that was promised, although as Schulte (2008a; 2008b) and McMann (2004) argue, it is unfair to lay the blame for this failure of the 'democratic project' solely on the shoulders of the NGO sector, given the near total failure of the state to engage (see also Koichumanov et al. 2005). In response to this, since the early 2000s, the European and North American donors have moved away from funding 'civil society' on the same scale as it enjoyed in the 1990s. Less money has been available for civil society capacity-building and training since then, and more has been targeted towards NGOs that have a proven track record on delivering services, or positive advocacy outcomes, and / or which are in a position to support smaller, newer NGOs themselves (such as civil society support centres) (ACSSC 2006b).<sup>12</sup> In addition, as discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, under the terms of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness made in 2005, donors are now more focused on providing aid directly to state institutions, and on building the capacity of those institutions to deliver sustainable development and good governance, rather than funding local NGOs (Kerr 2007; UNIFEM 2007; Staszewska 2011). In response to this (as well as other factors), as will be discussed in chapters 5 and 7, recent years have seen the maturation and 'professionalisation' of the NGO sector, with a sharp fall in the number of NGOs operating, and a more complex relationship developing between this sector and the state, the wider population, and other actors within 'civil society'.<sup>13</sup>

### **Respondent understandings of 'civil society'**

In a pair of papers written for the Social Research Center at the American University of Central Asia, Schulte (2008a; 2008b) addresses the question of whether or not a local concept of 'civil society' now exists in Kyrgyzstan. She argues that in popular perception, 'civil society' and NGOs are interchangeable as 'institutions of democracy', and also that the NGO sector is seen as 'a new driving force for introducing new social principles based on self-initiative, participation and openness' (Schulte 2008a, p.5). However, she also argues that the model of civil society that has been adopted

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<sup>12</sup> See also: interview with academic working at the American University of Central Asia, female, age 26, 6 July 2009; interview with expatriate Regional Advisor, international NGO, male, mid-50s, 20 July 2009.

<sup>13</sup> For a very comprehensive overview of the development of the NGO sector and 'civil society' in Kyrgyzstan, see ACSSC (2006b). See also Giffen et al (2005); Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova (2008); Matikeeva (2008); Tiulegenov (2008); and Schulte (2008a; 2008b).

in Kyrgyzstan, i.e. paid NGOs, rather than the promotion of voluntary organisations, or other looser, informal associations, has stifled any attempt that might have been made to localise the concept.

*'What does civil society mean to you?'* was one of the questions that I posed to my respondents. Based on their responses, while I would agree with Schulte that no common endogenous understanding of the term has emerged, at the same time, it is too simplistic to equate civil society and NGOs. As NGO workers (who are assumed to be representatives of 'civil society'), the way that my respondents engaged with the idea of 'civil society', and the extent to which they saw themselves as actors central to 'civil society' varied considerably.

One respondent, who worked for a women's crisis centre, strongly identified civil society with the professional sphere of the non-governmental sector:

INTERVIEWER: What for you is 'civil society'?

RESPONDENT: Well for me really it is the [sector] that I work in. Yes, because I offer services there as a psychologist in a crisis centre, which is also a social organisation (interview with psychologist at a women's crisis centre, age 47, 5 March 2010).

This strong association between individual professional status and activity, the NGO sector, and 'civil society' is echoed in the words of another respondent (who worked at a different women's crisis centre, one of my three case study groups), although her definition of what 'civil society' is, and its relationship to the NGO sector, is more complex:

INTERVIEWER: Civil society and the NGO sector, in your opinion, are they the same?

RESPONDENT: Well in my opinion... Yes. They are the same, absolutely. Of course. [...] It's one field – development tendencies, and civil society, and NGOs, often they are the same. Well ... NGOs react to civil society, to processes of civil society. And we can influence (interview with a consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

This respondent also had a strong sense of herself as an actor within 'civil society', and as someone who felt she was in a position to assess the health of 'civil society'. Referring to the role that civil society groups were taken to have played in the ouster of former President Akaev in 2005,<sup>14</sup> she reflected on how civil society had become more passive since then:

[S]ometimes there are questions that come up, and [and they are important enough that civil society stands up] and people speak out.... But that kind of [active initiative] I personally – as a representative of civil society! *[laughs]* – that kind of initiative, I don't see it the way it used to be there. We had a very big, well a 'peak', in civil society...' (interview with a consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

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<sup>14</sup> As discussed in chapter 1, debate continues as to the extent of this role. See Radnitz (2010) and Cummings (2012).

By contrast, another respondent, the head of an organisation working for women's economic empowerment in Osh, in the south of the country, articulated a different relationship between 'civil society' and the NGO sector, seeing the latter as one sector among others (the state, the market, the media) that should be working together to protect the space inhabited by 'civil society':

INTERVIEWER: What does civil society mean for you?

RESPONDENT: That is, of course, much discussed, but regardless of that... In general, we understand civil society in different ways. So for example some people say that it is just the NGO sector. [...] And then they say that there are three, four sectors now ... state, business, NGOs, and media. But then where are the people? [...] We have forgotten about the people in our structure. [...] So I think it's our society, where all citizens live. But so that citizens [can have a decent quality of life], so that they will have education, good health, so that they are able to eat well, for example, live well with good conditions, not need anything. For that, these four sectors have to [create the right conditions] (interview, director of a women's economic empowerment organisation based in Osh, female, age 37, 24 February 2010.)

By contrast, among most of my other respondents who spoke of 'civil society', their understanding of the term was far more abstract, encompassing a space that was not just occupied by NGOs, or by other civic groups. And while some located their own organisation within 'civil society' – and civil society as a space separate from mainstream politics – that did not mean that they made any strong association between wider 'civil society' and the activities that they engaged in on a day-to-day basis as activists and NGO employees or volunteers.

INTERVIEWER: If I say the words 'civil society', what does that mean, for you?

RESPONDENT: Well that's all people, in general, I guess... [...] But, well, we are a part of the civic sector, and our organisation, that is we are those people who don't have any [connection] to any politics. So yes, that's probably what civil society is. I think (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, female, age 28, 4 November 2009).

## New value systems

The absence of any knowledge, experience and other resources of vital importance for the creation of a democratic society in the country, as well as the risk of the country's regression to the former authoritarian regime motivated western states to deliver active support to the development and promotion of NGOs. In turn, NGOs were seen by donors as institutions required for the creation of a system of checks and balances *vis à vis* the public sector, as well as *bearers of the new value system*' (ACSSC 2006b, p.25) (My italics).

As the quotation above indicates, in addition to providing a means for donors to sidestep the state (in its immediate post-Soviet incarnation, considered to be inherently unreformed, corrupt, and ineffective) in their delivery of aid to the Kyrgyz Republic, NGOs were also to act as bearers of a new value system. Shaped by the dominant discourse of neoliberal citizenship (outlined in chapter 2), this new value system was one that recognised and embraced the idea of individual responsibility for

oneself and one's family, rather than expecting the state to provide (see for example Bauer et al. 1997; ACSSC 2006b; Schulte 2008a).

At the heart of this was a fundamental attempt to reconfigure the relationship between the citizen and the state, to alter the social contract that had existed in the later Soviet period, which (as discussed in the previous chapter) had provided a system of universal social benefits, determined by membership of a particular social group (for instance, 'worker-mothers'), but *not* by relative need (or indeed, demand) (see Sidorova 1975; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Fodor 2002; Haney 1999). Gone was the idea of the citizen and her entitlement to social rights and to an adequate, if basic standard of living; instead, certain categories of 'beneficiaries' – many created by the collapse and the economic restructuring that followed, such as 'the unemployed' – would be entitled to limited, targeted social protection payments from the state and support from NGOs (Howell 1996; Kandiyoti 1999; Bauer et al. 1997). The very establishment of NGOs to advocate for and provide to particular constituent groups (e.g. victims of domestic violence, disabled women, poor single mothers) underlined this; these organisations were not there to help *everyone*, they were there to help particular groups of people, assumed to be particularly affected by the adverse impacts of economic collapse and structural reform.<sup>15</sup>

But of course, popular attitudes did not change overnight, and as Howell recounts in one of the first academic studies to consider early development intervention in Kyrgyzstan, initial drives to provide food relief in 1993 and 1994 were of limited impact for the reason that it was difficult for agencies to determine who was most in need of assistance. 'This was partly because of a general perception of a decline in living standards, partly because of a reluctance on the part of some to admit to poverty and partly because of the widespread distribution of allowances which created both an expectation of support from the state and a sense of entitlement' (Howell 1996, p.65). This sense of entitlement was extremely strong, and as Haney (1999) notes, writing on reaction to the withdrawal of universal state benefits to mothers in Hungary, throughout former state socialist countries, there was angry resistance to the changes. Kamp (2004) observed similar dissatisfaction among women facing a comparable process in Uzbekistan in the 1990s. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, though, there was no question of being able to go back to a system of near universal welfare provision, both logistically (the money to pay the benefits wasn't there), but also politically, because the economic and political reforms, and the development assistance 'package' that the state had in effect signed up to necessitated a shift from the recognition of universal social rights to be enacted through state provision of employment and social welfare, to targeted assistance based on material need and a

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<sup>15</sup> Bernal and Grewal (2014a) provide an interesting discussion of the way that NGOs effectively create new categories of women, e.g. 'grassroots', 'trafficked'.

huge reduction in the size of the welfare state and what services it could provide (Howell 1996; Pétric 2005; Bauer et al. 1997; McMann 2007. See also Haney 1999). But this did not mean that everyone was able to adapt to the new regime. As some of my respondents noted, there were many in Kyrgyzstan who effectively did not survive the 1990s.

*[Speaking of her parents' generation]* But of course it was harder, more complicated, because they were already at that age where they were practically ready for their pensions ... when all the support was supposed to come from the state, and everything collapsed, of course it was harder. [...] [T]here were a lot of people of that age who were broken by perestroika. Because they had very different expectations on the state (interview with consultant, women's crisis centre (case study 1), female age 40, 29 September 2009).

A lot of people just [fell down]. They lost their jobs, they couldn't establish themselves, they started drinking, they died. Lost their homes, their families....People started to, they suddenly understood, that is, that their lives depended only on themselves. And not everyone succeeded in [re-establishing themselves]. [...] After perestroika, when there was no one to work with children... [...] And there is [a generation]. Well, children who were not needed, who were neglected. [Who had] crazy parents. Well crazy in that they themselves needed help (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 29, 12 October 2009).

As Hemment found in her research on feminist activism in Russia in the 1990s, and as I found talking to my respondents, many of the women who became active in NGOs in the 1990s were drawn to this field of work precisely because they *embraced* the 'new' values of self-reliance and responsibility. In Russia, Hemment (2007) found that women active in a provincial feminist group found the new rhetoric around the need for individuals to take responsibility for themselves, and for meeting their own welfare needs within the 'civil society' sphere of 'solidarity, self-help, and goodwill' (Chandhoke 2007, p.608), extremely liberating. To them, it signalled freedom from the overbearing powers that the state had previously exercised in determining the fortunes of Russia's citizens, and an opportunity to play a role in influencing the development of post-Soviet Russian society, as well as to be active in alleviating the impacts of market reforms on ordinary people. Likewise, Schulte (2008a, p.5) notes that in Kyrgyzstan, women were drawn away from earlier careers as academics, teachers, lawyers, or doctors to work in the NGO sector, seen in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s and early 2000s as 'a new driving force for introducing new social principles based on self-initiative, participation and openness' (see also Giffen et al. 2005, p.23).

Few (only four) of my respondents had been active in NGOs in the 1990s, but it was clear that many had absorbed the ideals of self-reliance and targeted support to particular groups:

RESPONDENT: The kind of social policies that... provided social support to its citizens, that would be brilliant, of course. [...]

INTERVIEWER: But is that a 'right' for you?

RESPONDENT: No, it's not a right, it would be social support, and not for me, but social support to the family, social support to... well pregnant women, or women with small children (interview with a consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 40, 29 September 2009).

Several of my respondents spoke of how they felt these 'new' values were at odds with prevailing attitudes in Kyrgyzstan (often expressed in terms of 'mentality'), and how they felt part of their role was to try and encourage people to think differently:

I don't know, really, how people [here] do, how they do what they do in order to be so apathetic, I don't know. Well it's established that in the Soviet period, people just got used to [having everything decided for them], and everything done for them (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 29, 12 October 2009).

We did some projects like this ... say, 14, 16-year old girls, we did seminars, and... They just came from the village and we talked to them, and we told them about... They just saw us, you know, professional women, nicely dressed, nice looking, and we just talked about life, we talked about professional development, personal development, setting life goals, building self-confidence, having healthy self-esteem, and stuff like that. And that is changing their life too (interview with gender and development coordinator, international NGO, age 32, 29 July 2009).

As such, encouraging a change in 'mentality' so that people became prepared to assume greater responsibility for themselves and their wellbeing emerged as a strong motivating factor for these respondents, and their involvement in the NGO sector. In a sense, it signalled their rejection of the old Soviet social contract – a rejection based either on ideology, or on pragmatism, or perhaps a combination of the two – and their acceptance of the new ideals of 'civil society'.

## **'Gender equality and women's rights' in development in Kyrgyzstan**

In addition to the global level commitments to gender mainstreaming in development policy and practice detailed in chapter 2, as discussed in chapter 3, the need to address gender inequality as a particular development concern in the Kyrgyz Republic was, and still is, justified by donors and international organisations on the grounds that women in Kyrgyzstan at every level of society were particularly badly affected by the upheavals of the 'transition', and that the last 20 years has seen a reversal of many of the (superficial or otherwise) gains that were made in terms of gender equality during the Soviet period (Bauer et al. 1997; Asian Development Bank 2005; Corcoran-Nantes 2005). In Central Asia in particular, it was felt that this 'gender backlash' had gone beyond the matter of women's employment, with challenges to the legitimacy of women's presence and activity in the public arena at all coming from both the family and the community, religious leaders, and, in some instances, from the state, serving to reinforce existing gender inequality and prejudice within the private sphere (Handrahan 2001; Kandiyoti 2002a; Asian Development Bank 2005; Corcoran-Nantes

2005; McBrien 2006. See also Tickner 2001; Coyle 2003). In effect, this has become the region's main 'gender myth' in relation to development engagement.

As documented in other national contexts,<sup>16</sup> the arrival of donor organisations, combined with the establishment of gender as a policy focus in development and the policy of supporting 'civil society' led to two significant developments: a consideration of gender issues in national policy gradually became a condition of receiving development assistance at state level, and there was what can be described as a 'boom' in gender-focused NGOs in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s (Bauer et al. 1997; ACSSC 2006b; Simpson 2006; United Nations 2008). In the next section, I briefly consider the influence of donor engagement in regard to gender at the national level (and the outcomes of this engagement), before turning attention to NGOs and the gender and development (GAD) policy areas that have shaped their work.

### **National-level gender policy**

It was clear from conversations with my respondents that the influence of donors in regard to promoting gender equality extended right up to the level of the state administration. One respondent who had previously worked within the presidential administration recalled of her time there:

And at that moment, when I was working there, they were doing [gender analysis] of the family codex, [gender analysis] of the constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic. There were projects on the law of the Kyrgyz Republic on equal opportunities between women and men. [...] And UNDP supported our project and we published the results. There were some brochures that the OSCE supported, and so forth (interview with administrator and gender focal point, international development organisation, age 26, 10 September 2009).

A country gender assessment by the UN produced in 2008 makes the argument that by that stage, international organisations and donors were the main 'stakeholders' in terms of determining the national policy agenda relating to gender issues, as well as implementing and evaluating 'gender programmes', pushing the government to integrate gender into national development policy as part of aid conditionalities, and supporting women's rights organisations to lobby for legislation that promotes gender equality and protects women's rights (United Nations 2008). Several of my respondents noted how important support from international organisations had been in successful

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Hemment (2004); Hemment (2007); Johnson (2009); Salmenniemi (2008); Caiazza (2002); Kay (2005) on Russia, Mandel (2002) on Kazakhstan, and Alvarez (1999) on Latin America.

campaigns for the introduction of a 30% quota for women in the Kyrgyz Parliament, and to resist legislation that would have criminalised abortion for non-medical reasons, and legalised polygamy.<sup>17</sup>

However, the result of the influential role that donors have played in promoting gender equality and supporting 'gender work' is that gender issues are seen as something that has come from outside, and state-level engagement and policy formulation is based not on political or ideological commitment, but rather on the goal of accessing 'ideological and financial donor resources' (United Nations 2008, p. 24). The result is a self-referential cycle, whereby international organisations determine, fund, and evaluate gender policy (United Nations 2008), meaning that, as Kandiyoti argues in regard to gender policy throughout the Central Asian region, 'the issue of gender equality is currently kept in the public domain not through a critical engagement ... but via the technocratic packages of international aid agencies promoting capitalist markets and democratic governance' (Kandiyoti 2007, p. 614).

Finally, this external support on gender and women's rights issues is itself inconsistent. For despite the stated commitment of international organisations and donors to overcoming gender inequality and promoting women's rights, in practice the design and implementation of 'gender policy' by donors and international organisations is often haphazard, under-resourced, and poorly managed, in the Kyrgyz Republic as elsewhere (United Nations 2008. See also Tiessen 2007; Horton 2012; DARA 2012). As the 2008 gender assessment carried out by the UN notes: 'In spite of many declarations, it's difficult to achieve well-balanced integration of a gender approach into international programmes, because donor agencies and international organizations often don't have their own consistent policy towards gender development aspects' (United Nations 2008, pp.25–26). As two of my respondents noted, reflecting wider patterns of 'policy evaporation' in regard to commitments made at higher levels (Moser & Moser 2005, p. 15), despite 15 years of gender mainstreaming, gender is not systematically considered as an influential factor within development in the Kyrgyz Republic, but is treated as a separate issue, and one that only relates to women, rather than to relations of power *between* men and women and to wider development issues.

When people talk about gender here, it is always as a problem: violence, bride kidnapping, trafficking. But gender is part of life, it affects everything (interview with Gender and Development Coordinator, age 32, International NGO, 7 July 2009).

[E]veryone thinks gender just means women. [...] Gender is treated as something separate. It's not seen as a development tool, as a tool for governance. It's very frustrating (interview

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Kyrgyz academic, American University of Central Asia, female, mid-20s, 6 July 2009. Interview with Senior Gender Advisor, international development agency, female, early 40s, 20 August 2009. See also ACSSC (2006b) and United Nations (2008).



with Senior Gender Advisor, international development agency, female, early 40s, 20 August 2009).

### **The gender-focused NGO ‘boom’**

Gender equality issues and women rights quickly emerged as important areas of activity among NGOs in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s; a 1997 report by the Asian Development Bank estimated that in 1996, 50 of the 500 NGOs operating in Kyrgyzstan were working on the ‘improvement of women’s position’ in some form (usually involving self-help groups, income generation, and micro credit), of which 18 had official registration (Bauer et al. 1997, pp. 76–80). As with support to civil society organisations more generally, donors arriving in the country assumed that they were entering an environment where women’s organising and activism had no history. This ignored the presence, for instance, of the local-level state *zhensoviety* (women’s councils) that had been introduced during the Khrushchev period (Kamp 2004), as well as the dissident feminist groups that had emerged in the Soviet Union during the 1970s, and during perestroika (Douglas & Mamonova 1984; Mamonova et al. 1980; Cockburn 1991).<sup>18</sup>

One of the driving forces behind this ‘boom’ was the provision of gender training by international donors such as the Dutch human rights fund HIVOS and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) (both mentioned by respondents) to new groups and individuals considered to be potentially receptive to these ‘new’ ways of thinking. In addition to instruction on the practicalities of running an NGO, and how to write project proposals, this training included an introduction to the concept of gender:

I and another woman ... we started going to those very first trainings by Counterpart Consortium.<sup>19</sup> [...] And that’s when I heard what a crisis centre was for the first time. Then I started to analyse, and it’s true, violence is going on all around us. But we thought that that was the way it should be. The word ‘gender’, we hadn’t heard of it, didn’t know it at all (interview with director of a women’s crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 63, 11 December 2009).

Analysing the responses of those of my respondents who were professionally active in the 1990s so many years later, it is of course difficult to ascertain whether these processes of gender training represented the imposition (for want of a better word) of ‘alien’ ideas, adopted strategically by organisations and activists who knew that ‘talking the talk’ would enable them to gain access to project funding and resources. The respondent above certainly gives the impression that

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<sup>18</sup> I did not find any evidence of any dissident feminist groups operating in the Kyrgyz SSR. Of course, this does not mean that they did not exist.

<sup>19</sup> Counterpart Consortium's Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Support Initiative for Central Asia was an initiative funded by USAID to provide training and support to local NGOs. It was mentioned frequently by my respondents as one of the main providers of training to NGOs in the 1990s and early 2000s, but no longer appears to be active. See <http://www.civilsoc.org/nisorgs/uzbek/cntrpart.htm> (accessed 10 July 2012) and McMann (2004).

establishing a crisis centre and challenging violence against women were not something she would have thought of herself, had the idea not been presented to her. Elsewhere another respondent, a disability rights advocate, indicated that her decision to establish an organisation to help disabled *women* was strategic, and in response to external factors over which she had no control, rather than an existing commitment to women's rights or interest in promoting gender equality:

[I wanted to] open a society [for disabled people]. But I wasn't allowed to open it, because there already was that kind of organisation, so 'you don't have the right', and that was it. [...] And then [my acquaintance] said, 'why don't you start a women's organisation, I'll help you.' So we started a women's organisation, and she helped me to register, for [disabled women]. And so with that woman we started to work. Straight away I will say that we were not resolving women's issues. First of all, I needed to resolve general problems facing disabled people (interview with director, disabled women's organisation, age mid-50s, 24 March 2010)

But the first respondent also makes it clear that participating in this training gave her a framework which enabled her to identify an issue which, on reflection, she felt to be a problem: 'Then I started to analyse, and it's true, violence is going on all around us.' This idea – of gaining access to an analytical framework that helped to make sense of the new, post-Soviet reality – also comes out in the following response:

Well ... our NGO was one of the first. And it was very difficult for us, so we took experience from other countries. Because we didn't know how to orientate ourselves. Should we orientate ourselves back towards the Soviet period? Or towards traditional Kyrgyz society? Or towards some other kind of ideas? So it was very complicated for us, we couldn't choose. So when we were offered this word 'gender', or it was offered [to be accepted by our society], this understanding of 'gender', we of course worked at it and we came to understand it in some way, yes! (interview with a consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

She also compared using gender as a frame of analysis to the use of rhetoric on women's rights during the Soviet period, which she felt had not reflected the reality of relations between women and men:

We didn't talk about gender, but we talked about women's rights. We talked in different terms, about how women and men were equal. [...] [A]lthough of course there were problems as well, absolutely, because women had to do everything, absolutely. They had to take part in politics, reproductive functions, fulfil everything, raise children, feed them, clothe them, everything was on women, so in the Soviet period, there was also this [misalignment] in terms of women's issues as well (interview with a consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

It is clear that from these respondents' recollections, the idea of gender, and related concepts such as equality and gender-based violence arrived in Kyrgyzstan through the technocratic medium of 'gender training', designed to equip participants with a framework that they could then use in their

work with women adversely affected by the upheavals of the 1990s. But significantly, the other way in which gender ‘arrived’ was through the practical issue of what activities and programmes donors were prepared to fund. In the mid-to-late 1990s, supporting victims of violence against women and widening women’s political participation were two areas of activity that donors were particularly keen to support; indeed, they became the focus areas of my first and second case study NGOs, profiled in the next chapter. More recently (i.e. since the mid-2000s), money has become available for work on sexual and sexuality rights, as this area has become one of increasing importance for Western donors. This has enabled my third case study, the LGBT rights organisation, to garner financial support.

### **Violence against women: crisis centres**

Since the signing of the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, gender-based violence against women has come to be accepted by the international agencies and organisations working in development as both a human rights and a development issue, given that it represents the ultimate expression of gender inequality, and severely limits the opportunities of women and girls who are affected to realise their right to services such as health and education, and to benefit from economic development (see Hoare 2007). In the post-Soviet republics, gender-based violence was seen to be a particular problem, given that across the former Soviet Union, there was a sharp rise in officially reported cases, reflecting, it was assumed, the ‘gender backlash’ discussed at the end of chapter 3. However, while violence against women was a taboo issue that was not widely discussed during the Soviet period, as several of my respondents pointed out, it certainly took place; it was just rarely reported. One respondent, who would have been in her late teens when the Soviet Union collapsed, recalled the following:

We had neighbours, for instance, and the husband would come home drunk, and he [always beat his wife]. [...] I saw all this, from childhood (interview with volunteer at a women’s crisis centre (case study 1) and a children’s rights centre, female, age 35, 30 November 2009).

Extremely low levels of reported violence against women during the Soviet period masked the fact that most cases were never officially recorded, and police would often refuse to get involved in ‘domestic’ incidents, stating that these were matters to be resolved within the family (Human Rights Watch 2006). Since the collapse, domestic violence in particular has come to be acknowledged by state agencies as well as by the wider society as a significant issue affecting many women in Kyrgyzstan, with one study noting that one in four women had experienced physical violence within the home (Moldosheva 2008, p.7; UN Human Rights Council 2010).

Reflecting this awareness among donors of high levels of domestic violence and of other forms of gender-based violence, one of the most visible examples of the arrival of GAD to Kyrgyzstan was the

large number of women's crisis centres that opened in the late 1990s, offering women victims of violence psychological and legal support (ACSSC 2006b).<sup>20</sup> This included my first case study. This was part of a wider crisis centre 'movement' that emerged first in Russia in the early 1990s, and then expanded throughout the former Soviet Union. Introduced by Western feminists working for US-funded development organisations to local activists in Moscow and St Petersburg, crisis centres were quickly established in many Russian cities. Initially funded by international donors, many subsequently came under the control of local and city authorities.<sup>21</sup> However, following the trajectory of the 'depoliticisation' of feminist concerns within GAD policy outlined in chapter 2, in the former Soviet republics in particular, women's crisis centres were presented as a technical 'fix' to an identified 'problem' (violence against women), rather than a means of challenging the social institutions upholding and perpetuating gender-based violence. In contrast to the rape crisis centres and battered women's refuges established in Western Europe, North America and Australasia in the 1970s, which were the product of grassroots, radical feminist activism, the crisis centres established in the Kyrgyz Republic, and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, were the product of donor programmes aimed at eradicating violence against women within a development framework (Moldosheva 2007; Hemment 2007; Johnson 2009). As Moldosheva (2007) notes, this means that crisis centres operating in Kyrgyzstan have never necessarily worked to a feminist agenda, in terms of challenging the dominant gender regime in Kyrgyz society, and the role it plays in perpetuating gender discrimination and gender-based violence.

In addition to being shorn of its feminist roots, the crisis centre model was presented as a 'one size fits all' answer to the 'problem' of gender-based violence affecting women, *the* way to both analyse and address the issue that was sometimes at odds with the way that local activists understood the problems facing women. Writing on the establishment of a crisis centre in a provincial city in Russia, Hemment (2007) notes that the activists with whom she worked felt that domestic violence and other forms of violence against women were the outcomes of women's wider economic and social marginalisation, as well as practical problems such as the shortage of housing in the city; they did not feel that a crisis centre providing counselling and support could, on its own, do much to reduce levels of domestic violence in the city, if nothing was done to address these underlying issues. And yet, the only money available was to fund a crisis centre. As will be discussed in chapter 7, the leadership of the crisis centre that I have used as a case study have also to an extent resisted the

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<sup>20</sup> As will be discussed in the next chapter, by 2009, when this research was conducted, only a few of these crisis centres were still operating; only my case study group was in a position to provide emergency accommodation and extended support.

<sup>21</sup> Hemment (2004; 2007) and Johnson (2009) write extensively about this trend in Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s.

‘one size fits all’ model, expanding their activities to confront what they see as some of the core issues driving gender-based violence in Kyrgyzstan.

In another study of the crisis centre movement in Russia, Johnson charts the way that changing donor priorities – particularly among American donors – saw crisis centres having to adjust the focus of their activities, from sexual violence to domestic violence to trafficking, in order to continue to secure funding (Johnson 2009). In regard to the situation in the Kyrgyz Republic, the question of ‘grant chasing’ and the role of funding streams in determining organisational activities and priorities will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters. Suffice to say here, however, that a similar need to change activities in line with external priorities is hinted at in the following quotation:

And gradually I have also come to understand that new words are emerging, and also some kinds of new spheres of activity. Before [our organisation] didn’t work with women refugees, and now we do. So I have come to understand more and more ... that women’s rights in Kyrgyzstan, just as they are linked to our culture, so they should be linked to international practice (interview with a consultant at a women’s crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009.)

It is significant, however, that this respondent presents this process as one of being introduced to new ideas and areas of concern, and of expanding her own knowledge and understanding, rather than of feeling that changing donor priorities are dictating the activities of her organisation.

### **Women’s political participation as a development issue**

Another GAD focus area that has been evident in the work of local NGOs in Kyrgyzstan is that of increasing women’s political participation and leadership; this constitutes the main arena of activity for the second of my case study groups, profiled in the next chapter.

Increasing women’s political participation – as voters and as holders of elected office – has long been seen as a key means of furthering women’s interests and promoting gender equality, both by (some schools of) feminist theorists and by feminists and women’s rights activists working in development. As touched upon in chapter 2, feminist political theorists such as Pateman (1988) and Vogel (1989, cited in Yuval-Davis 1997) argued that women’s exclusion from the political realm was one feature of their status as ‘non-citizens’. As discussed in chapter 3, quotas to ensure the presence of women in decision-making bodies were also a central plank of Soviet equalities policy, meaning that trying to raise women’s representation in political bodies back to ‘Soviet levels’ continued to be seen as an important priority for many local activists. In regard to ‘women’s rights and gender equality’ in development, women’s equal participation in political processes has come to be seen as a development goal in and of itself, a means of reducing gender-based poverty, and integral to democratisation and ‘good governance’. As I (while working for Oxfam GB in the mid to

late 2000s) and a colleague argued, '[w]omen's equal participation and leadership in decision-making processes at every level' is seen as 'fundamental to attempts to eliminate gender-based poverty', given that so much of that poverty is a result of – and perpetuates – women's social, economic, and political marginalisation and lack of control over decisions that affect their lives (Hoare & Gell 2009, p.1). In the same chapter, we highlighted the role that female legislators have played in drawing attention to and pushing for legislation on issues relating to gender equality and women's poverty, such as gender-based violence, equal pay, reproductive rights and access to contraception, and anti-discrimination legislation, as justification for promoting women's equal political participation as a development goal. Elsewhere, Kandawasvika-Nhundu makes the argument that democracy is meaningless without the equal participation of women, on the grounds that 'A democracy worth the name must have women's equality with men at its heart. Thus gender equality must be an explicit goal for democracy-building processes and institutions' (Kandawasvika-Nhundu 2009). Karybayeva, meanwhile, contends that bringing the abilities and experience of women into government brings new issues onto the agenda and promotes the growth of political competition, ultimately 'improving the quality of governance' (Karybayeva 2004, p. 4), highlighting the centrality, in her view, of gender equality to the good governance agenda.

The idea that increasing the number of women to elected office will automatically result in improvements in regard to gender equality and women's rights has been critiqued in some quarters. Batliwala (2011) questions the inherent 'good' assumed to accompany 'women's' and/or 'feminist' leadership, when that leadership does not set out to challenge and transform existing, intersecting power relations. Dagnino (2007), Dietz (1992), and Duncan (1996) all point to the limits of political participation and representation within the constraints of (neo)liberal representative democracy. Elsewhere, Matheu (2009) and Davids (2011), writing on Honduras and Mexico respectively, note that the physical presence of women in elected assemblies does not necessarily result in greater attention to 'women's issues', or in legislation strengthening women's rights, when the women who are elected hold conservative views and/or are of religious backgrounds (see also Celis 2005 and Galligan & Clavero 2008, in regard to women lawmakers in Europe). Coming back to the discussion of GAD, implicit in these critiques is the argument that women do not constitute a homogenous group with a defined, common set of needs and interests. For women elected to public office, party affiliation, class, religion, political survival, and any number of other factors may 'trump' gender in regard to determining their priorities. In addition, it has been noted that some development programmes designed to bring women into decision-making bodies have been short term, and have failed to prepare women candidates effectively and equip them with the skills needed for office,

meaning that once elected, they are overwhelmed and unable to carry out their roles to a high standard.<sup>22</sup>

Within the context of development intervention in Kyrgyzstan, programmes promoting women's inclusion in political life were seen as particularly important in the 1990s and early 2000s, given how dramatically the numbers of women in public office had fallen following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and given the country's 'governance deficit' (Karybayeva 2004; Corcoran-Nantes 2005; Moldosheva 2005; Campbell & Teghtsoonian 2010; Ismagilova 2001). As Alymkulova et al. (2004), Moldosheva (2005), and Karybayeva (2004) all note, negative gender stereotypes regarding women's suitability for leadership remain very strong in politics in Kyrgyzstan. In addition, according to Karybayeva (2004), potential and elected candidates have to contend with horizontal and vertical gender discrimination in the legislative and executive branches of government, as well as a patronage-based party political system that is very masculine. A 2005 UNDP/UNIFEM report identifies lack of funds to pay registration fees and meet campaign costs as further barriers to women's participation as candidates in elections (Moldosheva & Asylbekova 2005). It is within this context that the feminist umbrella group, my second case study, profiled in the next chapter, was seeking to increase the number of women standing for elected office, through providing training and support.

### **Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights in development**

Ilkharacan and Jolly (2007) place LGBT rights (the focus of activity for my third case study group) in development within a wider 'sexual rights' framework. This framework has emerged from years of earlier organising in the global North and South by rights activists who were feminists, LGBT, sex workers, and people living with HIV, but seeks to move beyond 'identity politics' to securing the right of all to sexual fulfilment and freedom from coercion in regard to sex, regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Ilkharacan and Jolly (2007) argue that sexual rights are integral to the realisation of development goals, because of the way that sexuality is linked to poverty (with, for instance, unmarried women and LGBT people facing employment and societal discrimination that keeps them poor), the spread of HIV, and women's freedom of movement and self-determination. However, Ilkharacan and Jolly also see sexuality as having the potential to contribute to empowerment and well-being, and as being a site of political struggle, and argue that making the 'positive and pleasurable sides of sexuality more possible for all' (2007, p. 1) should be a development concern. This approach is increasingly being accepted among mainstream development and human rights organisations, including those working in the Kyrgyz Republic. While

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<sup>22</sup> See Navy (2009) and Hoare (2009) for examples from an Oxfam GB study.

initial work on LGBT rights (in particular) in Kyrgyzstan was funded by two Dutch funds (one of which works solely on LGBT issues), larger donors including the Open Society Institute, USAID, and the European Commission have now moved into this area.<sup>23</sup>

Important milestones in regard to the incorporation of sexual rights into the mainstream development agenda include explicit references to sexuality made in the Vienna Declaration and Programme for Action following the World Conference on Human Rights (UN General Assembly 1993), in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) programme of action (UN Economic and Social Council 1994), and the Beijing Platform for Action (United Nations 1995), and the adoption, in 2004, of a working definition of sexuality by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization 2004). In addition, in the early 2000s, the UN Special Rapporteurs on Violence against Women, on Extrajudicial, Arbitrary and Summary Executions, and on Torture all addressed the links between violence and sexuality in their reports, and in particular, violence against 'sexual minorities'<sup>24</sup> (Ilkharacan & Jolly 2007, p. 15). In 2007, a set of principles on the application of existing international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity (known as the Yogyakarta Principles) were agreed on by a group of leading human rights experts; while not legally binding, they contain specific guidance on how countries are bound to protect the rights of LGBT people as part of their existing obligations under international law (The Yogyakarta Principles 2007). A resolution proposed by South Africa on human rights in regard to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) was finally adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, following on-going attempts since 2003 (UN General Assembly 2011; Ilkharacan & Jolly 2007).

Reflecting, no doubt, their recent arrival onto the development agenda, sexuality and sexual rights in general and LGBT rights in particular are very much seen as a discrete issue within development, rather than something to be considered across all programme and policy areas. For instance, as Kate Bedford has argued, much development policy aimed at improving social conditions, reducing poverty, and achieving gender equality has been premised on an assumption of the heterosexual, married couple as the basic household unit, what Bedford calls 'sharing nuclear units' (Bedford 2012). In an online article critiquing World Bank policy, she notes, 'the advice on building coalitions for reform relies on a harmonious notion of male-female partnership within households-read-as-nuclear

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<sup>23</sup> See ILGA Europe for a list of donor organisations funding work on LGBT rights in the region, [http://www.ilga-europe.org/home/how\\_we\\_work/developing/funding/other\\_funding\\_opportunities](http://www.ilga-europe.org/home/how_we_work/developing/funding/other_funding_opportunities) (accessed 25 June 2013).

<sup>24</sup> During the time that I spent with my third case study, the group went from using 'sexual minorities' as the preferred term to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to outsiders, to insisting on LGBT. This was on the grounds that 'sexual minorities' was too vague, did not make it clear who was being talked about (therefore meaning that the interlocutor would not have a chance to learn more about LGBT issues), and that the label 'minority' could result in further marginalisation. It is, however, used in many other policy and activist contexts, particularly those that might be considered hostile, as it is considered to be a more neutral term. See, for instance, SM-UG n.d. in Uganda.



families', but that the 'gap separating this vision of the household from so many peoples' lived reality is enormous' (Bedford 2012, no page numbers).

Perhaps more so than any other issue in recent years, moves to promote sexual rights at the international level have encountered extremely strong opposition from conservative and religious national blocs. Going back to the Vienna, Cairo (ICPD), and Beijing conferences, attempts to incorporate references to sexual rights were ultimately defeated by a coalition of Catholic and Muslim national delegations (Ilkcaracan & Jolly 2007). Work on sexual rights was particularly difficult during the Bush administration (2001-2009) when the so-called Global Gag Rule (denying access to funding to any organisation promoting or providing information about abortion services) and the enforcement of abstinence-only safe sex programmes placed severe restrictions on the activities of groups dependent on US funding (Ilkcaracan & Jolly 2007). Finally, the 2011 UN Human Rights Council resolution on sexual orientation and gender identity has since been partly countered by a second resolution on traditional values and human rights, proposed by Russia. The resolution was adopted by 25 votes in favour (including the Kyrgyz Republic, which had been absent at the vote on the SOGI resolution), 15 against, and seven abstentions (International Service for Human Rights 2012; UN General Assembly 2012; ILGA Europe 2011).

There has also been criticism in some quarters of the way that sexual rights – and the promotion and protection of LGBT rights in particular – have been adopted within development and human rights discourse as a marker of successful development, and instrumentalised as a way of marking certain national and religious groups as undeveloped, or even uncivilised. For instance, writing on immigration policy in the Netherlands, Judith Butler writes of the way that tolerance for open homosexuality has become institutionalised into what the Dutch State defines as citizenship:

In the Netherlands ... new applicants for immigration are asked to look at photos of two men kissing, and asked to report whether those photos are offensive, whether they are understood to express personal liberties, and whether the viewers are willing to live in a democracy that values the rights of gay people to open and free expression (Butler 2008, p. 3. See also El-Tayeb 2012).

Among some analysts, the association made between LGBT visibility and democracy – the fact that 'for Western audiences, the prevalence of a gay nightlife became the measure of democracy' (Nadine M. 2009, p. 4), as one Lebanese activist put it – has been termed 'homonationalism' (El-Tayeb 2012, p. 82). This approach also critiques the expectation that groups advocating for LGBT rights in developing countries will conform to pre-existing ideas of what it means to be gay, and to advocate LGBT rights (Nadine M. 2009). This includes adopting the term LGBT and using the labels 'gay' and 'lesbian', even when they may not correspond to local understandings of sexual identity, or

the way individuals see themselves. As Heller (2007) notes, accepting these labels at times is a purely strategic act, giving the case of a Russian woman who told her that she had adopted the label 'lesbian' because that's what American LGBT activists had told her to do if she wanted material and moral support.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Western donors arriving in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s did so with a fixed set of ideas regarding how the country should develop, premised on the assumption that transition to a market economy and 'democratisation' were the only conceivable next steps for this post-socialist country. Central to this framework were the 'rolling back of the state' (and a significant reduction in the services and benefits that it could provide to citizens) and the nurturing of a vibrant civil society, both conceived of by the development agencies as projects to be in part implemented through supporting the establishment of local NGOS. And yet, donor understandings of 'civil society' – in Central Asia as in other regions – ignored the on-going theoretical debates on the concept, reducing it to a benign sphere of solidarity and good will, 'stripped of its ambiguities', as Chandhoke argues (2007, p.608). Donors also assumed that no form of 'civil society', or of associational activity, had existed in Kyrgyzstan (or the wider Soviet Union) prior to 1991, a position disputed by several commentators.

The 'civil society' established in Kyrgyzstan through donor assistance has not succeeded in ensuring the country's 'democratisation', but it has enabled the creation of a large number of NGOs, where most of my respondents worked or were active as volunteers. As such, my respondents can be taken as representatives of 'civil society' in Kyrgyzstan. And yet the way that my respondents engaged with the term varied considerably, going far beyond a simple equation of civil society with the NGO sector, and by extension, their own professional lives.

The term 'gender' also arrived in the Kyrgyz Republic in the early 1990s, firmly embedded within a framework of development programming, as a set of technical skills to be delivered through training to members of the newly emerging NGOs, along with proposal writing and budget management. Devoid of its transgressive, feminist roots and its history as an evolving concept within development discourse, as well as cut off from the vibrant conversations and contestations that were going on around it in other parts of the world, 'gender' was presented as another tool to be used to address the problems emerging from the social and economic upheavals of the 1990s, and the resulting development reversals. At the government level, working towards gender equality became yet

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<sup>25</sup> This woman had previously described herself as 'non-heterosexual', but also specifically as 'not lesbian' (Heller 2007).

another condition to be met in order to secure aid, an imposition from outside rather than something integral to the national project.

And yet, for some of my respondents, the technocratic 'gender training' that they received in the 1990s provided them with a framework to make sense of the new, post-collapse reality in which they found themselves, as well as to identify ways in which they could help other women. Crucially, 'gender' and the funding and training that came attached to it also gave them an organising principle around which to establish their NGOs, NGOs which in the example of my three case studies, have been able to survive and expand long after the 'gender trainers' packed up and left, and in the face of inconsistent and often inadequate funding for 'gender work'. It has also allowed these groups to develop expertise and long-running programmes in three important areas: violence against women, women's political participation, and sexuality rights. In the next three chapters, I move on to consider what this experience has actually been like for the people active in these organisations, and how they have used the organising principle of gender and the framework of donor-driven civil society to realise personal and organisational priorities, and react to rapid social change.

## 5. Gender-focused NGOs in Bishkek

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In the previous chapters, I have considered both the historical ‘gender regime’ inherited from the Soviet period, as well as the policy contexts in which donors arriving in Kyrgyzstan have operated since the 1990s, and how these shaped programming. In this chapter, I move on to analyse the local gender-focused NGO sector that has come into being within these contexts, and as a direct result of the policies and programmes of the international organisations operating in Bishkek. I start by providing an overview of the NGO sector in Bishkek in general, and of the characteristics of gender-focused NGOs in particular, before introducing my three case studies – a women’s crisis centre (case study 1), an umbrella organisation officially representing over 80 membership organisations (case study 2), and a youth-led lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights organisation (case study 3). I then go on to examine relationships between gender-focused NGOs (including my case study groups), looking in particular at the way that assumed hierarchies and processes of inclusion and exclusion are constructed, and contingent.

### Gender-focused NGOs in Bishkek

If you look at civil society leaders then there seem to be a lot of women leaders, maybe 60% of all leaders in the sector. And then I’d say about 20% of all NGOs call themselves gender and/or women’s rights organisations, according to their own understanding of what that means. In the 1990s there was a lot of money available for work on gender so a lot of organisations set themselves up as gender organisations, with very varying understandings of what that means (interview with independent gender expert, mid 40s, 19 October 2009).

As the quotation above indicates, a sizeable proportion of NGOs operating in Kyrgyzstan at the time of this research could be classed as ‘gender-focused’ NGOs. This was not a term used by any of my respondents – who almost universally used the term ‘women’s NGO’ (*zhenskii NPO*), either to describe their own organisation, or to differentiate their organisation and its activities *from* those of a ‘women’s NGO’. But I have decided to use it as a way of classifying a range of different organisations that, in some way, included a self-declared consideration of gender issues and a striving towards gender equality in their mission and work, however ‘gender’ in that particular context might be interpreted. In addition, as one of my respondents pointed out, the term ‘women’s NGO’ – even when used by organisations themselves, and/or to describe groups concerning themselves with what have traditionally been classed as ‘women’s issues’ – is inadequate, and often misleading.

Oh I hate using that phrase! What does it mean? The groups are so different, some are not even working on gender issues, some have men working in them, working on gender. [...] But we all use it and I suppose we know what it means, it's an easy way of saying it (interview with Senior Gender Advisor, international development agency, female, early 40s, 20 August 2009).

Identifying these 'gender-focused' NGOs within the wider NGO sector in Bishkek, however, turned out to be a less than straightforward task.

### **The NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan**

The number of NGOs (let alone unregistered community groups, 'initiative groups', which usually go on to become registered NGOs, self-help groups, and associations) currently operating in Kyrgyzstan is unclear, and during my fieldwork, I was unable to ascertain the exact figure. A survey carried out by the Association of Civil Society Support Centers (ACSSC) in 2006 found that there were more than 8000 registered NGOs (Plakhotnikova & Kurbanova 2008; Jailobaeva n.d.), while two years later, Baktygulov (2008, p.31) gave a figure of 11,000 (employing around 100,000 people), and Tiulegenov a figure of 14,000 (Tiulegenov 2008).<sup>1</sup> However, the 2006 survey also found that only 514 of these registered NGOs were actually operating, just 6% of the total (Jailobaeva n.d., p. 1), while an earlier survey by UNDP in 1999 found that over 50% of registered NGOs were not present at their registered address (ACSSC 2006b, p. 54). As one of my respondents noted, the number of dormant NGOs is particularly high in rural areas, where organisations may struggle to stay in funding communication loops, or lack the capacity and resources to write successful funding applications (interview with expatriate Regional Advisor, international NGO, male, mid 50s, 20 July 2009). The ACSSC also notes that '[most rural] NGOs have no access to basic information regarding legislation or funding sources [...] [as] access to information on training programmes and sources of funds is available only to NGOs in the capital or to some of the largest and most influential NGOs in regional centres' (ACSSC 2006b, p.55). Lack of access to the internet was also identified as a reason for rural organisations 'falling off the radar' by a respondent from my second case study group:

INTERVIEWER: How many organisations are in your network and how many of them are active?

RESPONDENT: About 80, although many are not active, maybe 30-35. Some do not have internet, which means that we cannot stay in contact with them, although sometimes they come into the office and see us (interview with Programme officer, umbrella organisation (case study 2), early 30s, 11 September 2009).

Before leaving for fieldwork, I was advised that one of the first things that I should do on arriving in Bishkek was draw up a typography of NGOs operating in Kyrgyzstan. I started to compile a list, drawing on the following sources: the website and materials of the Association of Civil Society

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<sup>1</sup> It is not clear how these figures were calculated.

Support Centers (ACSSC 2006a; ACSSC 2006b); conversations with staff at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) and a list provided by the Social Research Center at AUCA; a list provided by the gender advisor at an international NGO; a list on the Soros Fund Kyrgyzstan website; and accounts of the state of civil society given in Jeenbaeva (2008), Schulte (2008b), and Buxton et al. (2007). The list included the following categories:

- Human rights
- Migrant rights
- Women's organisations
- Children's rights, provision of services to children and young people
- Elderly persons' rights and service provision to elderly people
- Disabled rights
- Healthcare provision
- Environmental organisations
- NGO support and development centres
- Public assistance, humanitarian assistance, and social welfare
- Micro credit
- Community-based organisations
- Self-help groups
- Organisations promoting democracy and civic education
- HIV and AIDS
- Reproductive rights and reproductive health
- Sex workers rights and provision of services to sex workers
- Drug addiction
- LGBT rights
- Professional associations
- Conflict resolution
- Religious groups
- Legal aid and legal advice
- Agricultural extension
- Conflict prevention
- Business development
- Culture, art, and handicrafts
- Advocacy and lobbying
- Science and research
- Media

Having drawn up this list, I then started to try and categorise the different NGOs and groups that I came across, in particular to identify those that could be classed as 'gender-focused'. This was no easy task, as it soon became clear that, as remarked in the previous chapter, many organisations had very wide remits. In some cases, the range of activities made sense; for instance, a drug rehabilitation centre also working on HIV prevention, or a group providing civic education to teenagers as well as training to teachers in innovative teaching techniques. But in other cases, the remit of certain organisations' activities seemed unfeasible, with one group purportedly involved

over the course of its existence in providing gender training, programmes in youth leadership, a youth club, legal advice, micro credit, civic education, a hotline giving advice to potential migrants, programmes in women's leadership, human rights training for schoolchildren, and two social enterprise projects (ACSSC 2006a). In addition, as discussed above, it was difficult to ascertain which of these organisations were in fact active, short of ringing up the group's offices (where such information was available) and asking them, which I did not have the time or the capacity to do.

Realising that this list would probably not get me very far on its own in terms of gaining an assessment of the gender-focused NGO sector (as well as identifying which gender-focused NGOs were most active, and likely to provide good case study material), I turned as well to the growing body of locally produced literature on civil society in Kyrgyzstan, to try and gain a better sense of the dynamics of the NGO sector, and in particular, the characteristics of gender-focused NGOs operating within it. I also began to ask questions about the NGO sector, and which groups were most active within it, during preliminary background interviews.

### **Characteristics of gender-focused NGOs**

In both the 'local' literature produced in Kyrgyzstan on civil society and the NGO sector, and many of the conversations that I had with respondents, several recurring themes in regard to gender-focused NGOs emerged. Most often cited were the perceived lack of unity within the NGO sector as a whole, and the marginalisation of gender-focused NGOs from wider civil society; a particular style of leader (and leadership); and issues around sustainability.

#### ***Lack of unity***

Reading local accounts of 'civil society' in Kyrgyzstan, a theme that emerges again and again is disunity. Tiulegenov (2008) refers to the absence of any sense of common purpose among NGOs, while Matikeeva (2008) talks in terms of a lack of internal unity, of divisions running between NGOs based on their physical location (in the provinces or the capital), access to funding, and pro- or anti-government stance, and argues that this lack of unity is further impeding the development of the sector. Kovtunets (2008), reporting on the results of a survey of networking among NGOs, identified differing organisational capacity, lack of agreement in regard to which problems should be addressed and how, the 'politicisation' of certain NGOs, and the personal ambitions of some NGO leaders as barriers to effective networking and coalition-building. Elsewhere, the Agency for Social Technologies listed the following divisions as accounting for the absence of cooperation and links within the NGO sector: advocacy and lobbying vs. service provision; urban vs. rural; registered vs. unregistered; independent vs. dependent on government or donor support (ACSSC 2006b, p.72).

In particular, the idea that gender-focused NGOs (and the issues that they work on) are marginalised from wider civil society and that relations with other groups are poor seems to have become a taken-for-granted fact in Kyrgyzstan – another ‘gender myth’ – and is referred to in various local studies (see also Campbell & Teghtsoonian 2010). For instance, the 2008 United Nations country gender assessment notes that because gender-focused NGOs are concentrated in what it calls charity and social sectors, rather than prestigious human rights work, they lack visibility and influence (United Nations 2008, p. 24). It was also something that was frequently stated by my respondents (particularly those who had long experience of the sector) at the beginning of interviews, when I asked them to describe the state of gender-focused NGOs. For instance, an independent gender expert spoke of gender-focused NGOs as being ‘very stigmatised, marginalised within civil society’, in part because of their failure to engage in wider political processes and campaigning (again, in contrast to human rights organisations) (interview with Independent Gender Expert, female, mid-40s, 19 October 2009).

Lack of unity also came up in some of my interviews as one of the things ‘wrong’ with civil society in Kyrgyzstan today.

There was a time, when, well during [*former President*] Akaev’s time, when [civil society was] united. We had a great deal of strength, we were united, all of us. Never mind [who held which view] (interview with Director, disabled women’s rights organisation, female, mid-50s, 24 March 2010).

Interestingly, in the ‘local’ literature on NGOs, competition for funding or for positioning as ‘lead organisation’ in a particular field is *not* named as a reason for the perceived lack of unity (although it is identified in studies produced outside of Kyrgyzstan – see Cooley and Ron 2002, and Hemment 2004). This is surprising, given that competition would seem to be an obvious reason for reluctance to establish a ‘united front’, or to only do so under duress. It was certainly something identified by several of my respondents as a reason for poor relations among NGOs.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that you have good relations between your organisation and other organisations in civil society that work on other issues?

RESPONDENT: No. I can say that there are some organisations, our partners, with whom we work [...] there are a few organisations that, well we have a shared understanding, we could say. But then there are other organisations that feel that we are their competition (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, female, age 28, 4 November 2009).

Another reason that *was* cited in the ‘local’ literature for the lack of unity between NGOs was that often coalitions and networks do not develop organically, but are artificially created and driven by requests from donors (Kovtunets 2008; ACSSC 2006b). ACSSC notes that often, network members



do not *know* that they have been joined to a particular network, or may continue to pursue their own organisational interests rather than those of the wider union (ACSSC 2006b, pp. 82–83). Such artificially created networks often barely function as such, and collapse once the donor sponsoring them withdraws. This echoes the thoughts of one of my respondents, on the subject of coalitions:

[W]ell at the moment we are trying to establish links with, establish relations with some other organisations. But so far, well it's only temporary; other organisations are just giving the impression that they want to work with us. For them, it's if the donors have asked them to work with us (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, female, age 28, 4 November 2009).

Some of my respondents also expressed considerable cynicism surrounding networks and coalitions as a means of bringing about greater unity and coordination, mainly relating to perceived struggles for control over such networks:

We had an idea ... a year ago ... to [establish] some kind of general network, to work together. Well those in the network [thought it up themselves]. But it all [fell apart] very quickly because... They had this question, who would control it, who! Who would be the most important [person]! *[laughs]* [...] But if they had been able to imagine what it was for, how it was important, well if it was important overall, maybe they would have been able to [see it through] (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 29, 12 October 2009).

Focusing on the absence of a permanent 'state of unity' and/or visible coalitions and networks is, though, a somewhat deceptive approach, as it draws attention away from fact that at times of crisis or threat, civil society groups in Kyrgyzstan – or sections within civil society – *have* formed effective and vocal 'united fronts' to respond to a particular issue. The most obvious is of course the high level of 'civil society' engagement in the response to fraudulent elections in 2005 (which eventually contributed to the ouster of President Akaev), but other examples include a successful mobilisation of civil society organisations against Government Decrees 358 and 20, which would have limited the activities of civil society organisations and created barriers to the existence of independent publishing companies, and in response to proposals on the part of politicians to limit access to abortion, and legalise polygamy (ACSSC 2006b; United Nations 2008).

In regard to the perceived marginalisation of gender-focused NGOs in wider civil society, I found that often as an interview progressed, a more complex picture would emerge. For instance, a Senior Gender Advisor working for an international development agency stated at the beginning of her interview that 'civil society here is very segmented, as it is in many places, and groups working on gender and women's rights issues are marginalised', but then went on to explain that there had been a recent shift, and now gender-focused NGOs were being invited to participate in wider civil society forums and events (interview with Senior Gender Advisor, international development agency,

female, early 40s 20 August 2009). This had nothing to do with a sudden appreciation for diversity and the importance of gender equality, she noted, but was rather because ‘the other civil society organisations have finally recognised the strong capacity of the organisations working on gender’. Another long-standing gender expert also agreed that relations between gender-focused NGOs and wider civil society had improved, and that in particular, alliances were now emerging with high-profile human rights organisations (interview with NGO leader and academic, female, mid-40s, 28 October 2009).

Both of these respondents also expressed the view that the previous status quo had been the result not just of gender-focused NGOs being shunned by other civil society groups and alliances, but also of the actions of the gender-focused NGOs themselves. The Senior Gender Advisor at the international development agency said that for a long time, gender-focused NGOs had not seen themselves as part of wider civil society (interview with Senior Gender Advisor, international development agency, female, early 40s, 20 August 2009), while the NGO leader and academic felt that ‘we were in part to blame, we didn’t make attempts to connect with other groups’ (interview with NGO leader and academic, female, mid-40s, 28 October 2009). As such, one could speculate that over time, the idea of marginalisation had not only become taken-for-granted, but also a central aspect of the identities of these groups, and the way they positioned themselves.

It is also important to point out that, as these two experienced respondents argued, shifting dynamics within civil society and the gradual incorporation of gender-focused NGOs into its ‘mainstream’ did not mean that gender issues had gained currency or acceptance in wider Kyrgyzstani society, or within state policy-making apparatus. All three agreed that outside of civil society, gender remained a marginal issue, given little consideration in state policy, for instance, or the formal political sphere (see also United Nations 2008). And this was equally true of gender-focused NGOs; as one put it, ‘many people outside of the women’s NGO sector are still surprised to hear that there are dedicated organisations working on women’s rights and gender’ (interview with Independent Gender Expert, female, mid-40s 19 October 2009).

### **Leadership**

In their ‘Profile of an NGO leader’ (based on interviews with ten NGO leaders), Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova (2008) characterise the typical NGO leader in Kyrgyzstan as female, over 30, and driven by a desire to make the world a better place, work independently, and realise her own potential. The dominance of women in leadership positions, and more widely in ‘civil society’, frequently came up during my interviews, and will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6. But so too did the dominance of leaders who had established gender-focused organisations in the 1990s, and who

were showing little signs of moving on to allow a new generation to take over, something that Batliwala terms ‘founder syndrome’ (Batliwala 2011, p. 42). As Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova (2008) observe, these leaders may have come to the newly emerging NGO sector with ‘energy and charisma’ (p. 25), but over ten years later, their on-going presence at the helm of the organisations that they had established was identified by several of my respondents as blocking the development of the sector, and causing its stagnation. This was particularly noted in regard to gender-focused NGOs. ‘[T]here is no inflow of young people into the movement aiming to fight for equality and that significantly decreases its energy’, noted the authors of a country gender assessment carried out by the United Nations (2008, p. 23), while the Independent gender expert who I interviewed in October 2009 remarked that attempts in the late 1990s to bring up (in her words) a new generation of leaders had failed (interview, with Independent Gender Expert, female, mid-40s 19 October 2009). As the Senior Gender Advisor at an international development agency put it:

[The first generation of NGO leaders] are still in charge. There are no new leaders emerging, and there are no new groups emerging who are working on gender issues. [...] We need fresh blood (interview with Senior Gender Advisor, international development agency, female, early 40s, 20 August 2009).

One respondent – a self-declared ‘veteran’ of civil society in Kyrgyzstan – identified the lack of investment in capacity-building on the part of donors as one of the reasons for the absence of a new generation of NGO leaders:

In the 90s when lots of NGOs were starting up they got a lot of help from places like Counterpart International. Everything was so new and fresh, there was training available, discussions on what civil society should be and where it should be headed, how to build civil society. But from the end of the 90s that started to tail off, there’s no investment now in building up civil society organisations. People like me, the ‘old wave’, we benefited from that earlier investment, we got something out of it. But there is no investment being made in the younger generation (interview with NGO leader and academic, female, mid-40s, 28 October 2009).

As Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova (2008) argue, the longevity of many NGO leaders in Kyrgyzstan has led to the ‘personification’ (p. 25) of their organisations, with the bulk of the group’s capacity, contacts, and institutional knowledge held by the leader. Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova argue that this is contributing to the stagnation of the NGO sector, exacerbated by the concurrent exodus of younger professionals from NGOs to business and government (and, I would argue, to international NGOs working in the region), frustrated by the lack of opportunity to advance into leadership positions. In addition, they argue that the ‘personification’ of NGOs ultimately undermines their sustainability, because if an NGO leader *does* decide to move on, she usually takes her knowledge, skills, and professional contacts with her, leaving the organisation struggling to survive.

### ***Sustainability and 'grant chasing'***

Smaller groups are still existing from grant to grant, project to project; they don't have any choice. That's not just women's NGOs, but they in particular are stuck in that cycle, because they are not near the top of the NGO hierarchy (interview with Independent Gender Expert, female, mid-40s, 19 October 2009).

Another feature associated in particular with gender-focused NGOs is lack of sustainability, and the idea that they are guilty of 'grant chasing', i.e. switching activities in line with changing donor priorities, rather than the needs of the constituency groups they claim to represent and / or assist. While the ACSSC's (2006b) history of the NGO sector identifies this as a feature of the NGO sector overall,<sup>2</sup> the United Nations (2008) country gender assessment points to this being a particular characteristic – and limitation – of gender-focused NGOs. This serves to reinforce the marginalisation of gender as a 'foreign' issue, given currency by the argument that, reliant on donors, gender-focused NGOs are promoting outsider interests (International Crisis Group 2009).<sup>3</sup>

This perceived lack of sustainability among NGOs was something that was mentioned often by my respondents, but so too were difficulties that NGOs now faced in securing long-term funding, particularly to cover core costs (such as rent, and salaries for administrative and managerial staff) and organisational development:<sup>4</sup>

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it's harder now to get funding?

RESPONDENT: I am not sure. We are doing some research at the moment, with our members. But I think it probably is harder now for small NGOs to get funding, as donors are switching to programme work over project work. We have a programme, like a lot of the bigger NGOs, but smaller groups tend to work from project to project, grant to grant (interview with Programme officer, umbrella organisation (case study 2), female, early 30s, 11 September 2009).

One respondent spoke of how she felt she had not acted quickly enough in the past to secure what she called 'permanent funding', presumably core funding:

But now it's worked out that we don't have funding, we don't have permanent funding. I let them go, when those donors [were still coming here], I could have [sorted out] permanent funding, [when it was available]. And now of course there is no permanent funding, so I am afraid about funding (interview with director, disabled women's rights organisation, female, mid-50s, 24 March 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> See also Tiulegenov (2008), and Mandel (2002), who writes on the same subject in relation to Kazakhstan.

<sup>3</sup> This is an issue that will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup> An expatriate Regional Advisor for an international NGO providing support and training to NGOs suggested the following reasons for the decrease in funding available for local NGOs in Kyrgyzstan: changes in funding patterns (with donors moving away from core funding and funding to build capacity towards funding to implement particular projects); many of those who had established NGOs in the 1990s deciding to move into other fields; and the sheer volume of NGOs in such a small country proving in and of itself to be unsustainable (interview with expatriate Regional Advisor, international NGO, mid-50s, 20 July 2009).

The point regarding the lack of available funding for core costs and capacity building was backed up by a Senior Gender Advisor working for an international development agency in Kyrgyzstan, who felt that the strong capacity among the women's rights NGOs that had 'survived' was in spite of, rather than thanks to, the patchy support afforded by donors (interview with Senior Gender Advisor, international development agency, female, early 40s, 20 August 2009).

Echoing this view, for many of my respondents, sustainability was marked not necessarily by the ability to secure on-going financial support, but by the ability to *survive* during periods when funding was scant, or non-existent. Being able to survive and continue operating when there was no money to fund activities was presented as a marker of their professionalism, and of their commitment to those they were seeking to help:

Our experience is... We have a helpline, and even if there are no bucks, that is, no money, we say that, we work ourselves. Because if you come, you ring, that's it. It's a question of trust. And so because of that, there may be three, four months without any financial support (interview with psychologist at a women's crisis centre, female, age 47, 5 March 2010).

In regard to the charge of 'grant chasing', none of my respondents disputed the fact that their organisations were dependent on funding from outside of Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, with the exception of the Women's Crisis Centre (of which more below), which received some in-kind support from the city authorities in Bishkek, none would have been able to exist in their current form, and provide the services and undertake the advocacy activities that formed their praxis, without the support of foreign donors.

INTERVIEWER: So without the donors, would your organisation exist?

RESPONDENT: Without support from donors? Hmm... That's a difficult question. No, probably without the help of donors, our organisation could not operate. Because, well in principle, what could we do without the support of donors? I mean I suppose we could still do 'conversation' work, we could still give consultations, [that sort of thing], but in terms of material support, that wouldn't be possible (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, female, age 28, 4 November 2009).

However, there was also a certain resistance among my respondents to the idea that gender-focused NGOs were *particularly* guilty of 'grant chasing'. When I interviewed one NGO leader on the topic, she intimated that this perception again lay in a certain hostility towards gender-focused NGOs, and a lack of understanding about what they were trying to do:

Human rights groups used to refer to us, to women's groups, as '*grantadi*', there was this strange myth going round that all the money was going to women's groups, which wasn't true at all. In fact, we were receiving very little money, which we explained when other groups demanded to know why we weren't having more of an impact. We also explained

that the issues we were working on would take more than a few seminars to fix (Interview with NGO leader and academic, female, mid-40s, 28 October 2009).

## Case studies

In order to gain a more profound insight into the workings of gender-focused NGOs in Bishkek, how their members approached and carried out the various tasks that made up their work as ‘activist-professionals’<sup>5</sup> (Alvarez 1999), and how they interacted with other actors in the development sector in Kyrgyzstan (donor representatives as well as other NGOs), I elected to spend time working as a volunteer with three very different NGOs. As described in the introduction, my experience of working with these three groups was very different, which inevitably had an impact on the amount, and quality of data that I was able to collect on each group.

In this section, I introduce my three case study groups, providing information on their programme work, as well as the dynamics operating within each group, as I witnessed and experienced them. I then go on to look at some of the tensions that appeared to exist between different gender-focused NGOs within wider civil society in Bishkek; in this analysis, the idea of mainstream vs. alternative emerges strongly, with the concurrent assumption that so-labelled alternative groups occupy a position of marginalisation and exclusion vis-à-vis ‘mainstream’ gender-focused NGOs. However, in the final section of this chapter, I use a framework of shifting hierarchies of age, language proficiency, and access to donors to explore the dynamics within and between these groups in more detail, concluding that in fact, the picture is far more complex than a straightforward mainstream/marginalised division would imply.

### Case study 1: the women’s crisis centre

My first case study group was established as a women’s crisis centre in 1998, by the woman who remained director of the organisation at the time of this research; many of the other staff members had also joined ‘at the beginning’. According to a brochure published by the group in 2008,<sup>6</sup> its self-declared mission was to protect the rights of women and families; provide rehabilitation to women who had been victims of violence; prevent and actively defend ‘the population’ from gender-based and domestic violence and people trafficking; carry out research and analysis of the problems of violence in society; and provide legal education to the people of Kyrgyzstan.

At the time of this research, a total of 12 people worked at the crisis centre, all of whom were women (aside from a driver/handyman). One was ethnic Russian, another ethnic Korean; the

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of ‘activist-professionals’ and how this related to my respondents and their activities is discussed in greater detail in chapter 7.

<sup>6</sup> I do not provide the source material here or in later references to materials produced by my other case studies, in the interests of protecting their anonymity.

remainder were all ethnic Kyrgyz, and Kyrgyz was the language most frequently spoken in the office (including when the two non-Kyrgyz speaking members of staff were present). On one occasion, I was given a document to translate that made reference to a 'General meeting' (*Obshchee sobranie*) as well as a 'Board' (*Pravlenie*); furthermore, on the organisation's website, reference is made to five board members and 125 general members. However, I was not able to obtain any further information on these two structures and how they oversaw the operation of the organisation.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the centre formed part of the wider women's crisis centre movement that emerged in Russia and the other countries of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s (see Johnson 2009; Hemment 2004; Hemment 2007). While violence against women remained a serious issue in Kyrgyzstan – with the focus that is trained on its most visible and culturally specific form, bride kidnapping, masking more widespread prevalence of domestic violence and sexual assault – the organisation's work had been fundamental in bringing the issue onto the agenda, and pushing for a change in attitudes. As the director pointed out when I interviewed her, the issue had effectively previously been invisible in the country.<sup>7</sup>

Since its inception, the crisis centre had provided a variety of different support services to victims of violence against women – a telephone helpline, a counselling service, legal advice and support, and financial assistance and 'rehabilitation' to women who had left abusive households or who had escaped bride kidnapping – as well as operating the only functioning women's refuge in the country. At the time of research, this shelter had space for 16 women and children, and was housed in the grounds of one of the city's hospitals. The organisation also engaged in advocacy campaigns to raise awareness of violence against women, of the 2003 Law on Social-Legal Protection from Violence in the Family, and on various other issues that they saw as contributing to high rates of violence against women and children.<sup>8</sup> The organisation had also fairly recently begun providing assistance to victims of trafficking and refugee women, following encouragement from their main donor to do so (and, presumably, the funding that came with that encouragement), according to one member of staff who I interviewed (interview with a consultant at women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 40, 29 September 2009).

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<sup>7</sup> In Kyrgyzstan today gender-based violence against women is at least now recognised as a serious and prevalent problem, and legislation is in place to protect women and girls from violence (Asian Development Bank 2005; Human Rights Watch 2006). As so often noted elsewhere, the problem is implementation of existing legislation (including the 2003 Law on Social-Legal Protection from Violence in the Family), and the paucity of support services available to women attempting to escape domestic violence, or to seek redress following rape or sexual assault. In addition, social attitudes continue to view domestic and sexual violence as 'private' matters, and women are discouraged from leaving abusive relationships or seeking help, for fear of bringing 'shame' on themselves and their natal families (see Ilibezova 2012; UN Human Rights Council 2010).

<sup>8</sup> At the time of research, this included a campaign to discourage excessive consumption of alcohol, and plans to launch a campaign encouraging marriage registration, to ensure that women's rights within marriage would be protected.

The group had at the time of the research – and still has – a strong national presence, with the director frequently invited to participate in public debates on radio and television, and to advise on social policy. The director was also often approached by other non-governmental organisations to provide expert training on violence against women, or to speak at seminars and workshops. At the time of this research, the centre was financially secure, and received their funding from two main donors – HIVOS, the Dutch human rights foundation, and what appeared to be a private foundation based in Spain.<sup>9</sup> The centre was also in the unique position of having secured a limited amount of support from the Bishkek city authorities, in the form of free rent on the buildings they occupied, and free utilities. As far as I was able to ascertain, they were the only gender-focused NGO in the city to be receiving any assistance at all from the state. That said, receiving this support was not without its complications, as ensuring that the city authorities did actually honour their commitment and pay up appeared to be an on-going struggle.

From the time that I spent there, I gained the impression that there was a strong hierarchy within the organisation, with the director taking personal responsibility for the bulk of the decision-making, including at the day-to-day level. For instance, I arrived in the office one day to find her personally supervising two of her senior consultants as they drafted correspondence. On occasions, particularly involving conversations with those outside the organisation (for instance, at meetings with representatives from donor organisations, or potential donors, where I was asked to translate), the director would dominate the conversation, making it very difficult for other members of staff to contribute. The director was also very much the public face of the centre, representing it at public events and in the media. In this sense, she fitted the pattern of ‘personification’ of an organisation in its leader, identified by Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova (2008), and also commented upon by several other of my respondents (as discussed above). However, in her conversations with me, as well as during the interview that she gave, the director often drew attention to the work of her colleagues, and their contributions to the centre’s successes:

[The director] also asked me to add in something saying that S had run the campaign, and how much work she had put into it (field notes, 21 October 2009).

The director also emphasised that she saw the organisation as a team, and disputed the idea that without her, it would cease to exist. She expressed commitment to developing the leadership capacities of her colleagues, to ensure the organisation would survive once she moved on.

I want to continue this work. But I think that [we] will not close, because we have a team, we have great women who at any time can replace me. [...] Of course, maybe [they say that the crisis centre is me], but at the same time, we have a team, that can continue working

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<sup>9</sup> This was invariably referred to as the ‘Spanish fund’; I was unable to gather any further details.



(interview with director, women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 63, 11 December 2009).

Another member of staff whom I interviewed was of a similar view:

I am like a member of our team, I can say, because we have a team. In the organisation we work in a team (interview with senior consultant, women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 40, 29 September 2009).

Here, as may happen in other groups as well, there seems to be a lack of reconciliation between how the director and her team saw the organisation operating, and how this appeared to outsiders (including myself).

### **Case study 2: the umbrella organisation**

A leaflet published by the group in 2008 noted that my second case study group had been established in 1994, and at the time of this research, officially brought together 85 gender-focused NGOs in Kyrgyzstan. In reality, one of the members of staff estimated that 'maybe 30-35' were active, and that it was difficult to stay in contact with members, particularly those who did not have access to the internet (interview with Programme Officer, umbrella organisation (case study 2), female, early 30s, 11 September 2009). A newsletter, published monthly, served as another way of communicating with members. In addition to the three members of staff who I interacted with during my time at the organisation, a further two staff members were on maternity leave. All were ethnic Kyrgyz, and all switched continuously between speaking Russian and Kyrgyz. In addition to its membership of smaller NGOs, the organisation had a board (whose names and affiliations are prominently displayed on its website), although during my time there, I did not gain any sense of what role the board played in the management of the organisation.

The group was well known within the Kyrgyz Republic, but also had a strong international presence. It had obtained consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2005, and also participated annually at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York. As with my first case study, the umbrella group was run (effectively) by the same woman who had established it in the mid-1990s.<sup>10</sup> A former academic, she was an extremely forthright, charismatic woman, and a self-described feminist. Again, as with case study 1, outside of the group, the chair's name and persona were very much associated with the organisation, following the pattern identified by Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova (2008). In addition, within the organisation, there appeared to be a clear hierarchy, with the chair taking responsibility for most decision-making.

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<sup>10</sup> The head of the organisation was in fact the executive director, but she was on maternity leave at the time of this research, and in practice, subordinate to the chair.

## **Programme**

The group's stated goals, contained in its publicity materials were: promoting gender equality; the empowerment of women; the consolidation of the women's movement in Kyrgyzstan; the development of the capacity of women's NGOs; and the protection of women's rights. At the time of this research, two programmes were running: one monitoring the prevalence of violence against women; the other promoting women's participation in political processes. The group and its member organisations also took part in long-term monitoring of the implementation of CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, UNSCR 1325,<sup>11</sup> and the declarations of the CSW, and of national legislation and policy

The work on promoting women's political participation was an ambitious five-year programme to identify, train, mentor, and support women considering standing for election at local and national level. As the chair explained to me, the aim was not just to get women into parliament, but also to ensure that once they got there, they would be effective legislators and would push for gender equality and women's rights. As I wrote in my field notes, it was a tough course:

It's a five-year programme, because 'that's how long it takes'. There is a very strenuous selection process: each participant has to be nominated by two local NGOs, then there are interviews. Some are dropped along the way, even if they have been through the first couple of years. [...] The training is all focused on feminist, transformative leadership. They have to work very hard. There are training sessions several times a year, and then assignments. For instance, they are all sent away to monitor the implementation of a particular piece of legislation over six months, or come up with proposed revisions (field notes, 31 March 2010).

As such, the rationale behind the programme seemed to echo Molyneux and Razavi's argument that women representatives need on-going support '... before they can become effective advocates of women's rights—a counter-cultural agenda that is likely to face resistance in mainstream political institutions' (Molyneux & Razavi 2006, p. 8).

At the time when the group's political participation programme had been set up, the situation was particularly dire. Moldosheva (2005), for instance, writes of the very low numbers of women elected to the Kyrgyzstani parliament in the elections held in 2005, proving in the eyes of critics that earlier programmes to support women's leadership and political education had had no impact, while at the same time, the corrupt activities of ousted President Askar Akaev's wife were being presented as

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<sup>11</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted 31 October 2000, S/RES/1325 (2000). UNSCR 1325 'recognized the under-valued and under-utilized contributions women make to conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and securing peace [and] stressed the importance of women's equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security' (<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/womens-role-in-peace-and-security#sthash.FUWT2zyO.dpuf>, accessed 13 September 2013).

proof of the dangers of giving women too much power. By the time I came into contact with the group, the situation had altered in one significant regard: following pressure from local gender-focused NGOs and from international organisations, President Bakiyev had introduced a 30% quota for women in the national parliament in 2007 (Bedelbaeva & Kuvatova 2010). However, as one of my respondents (and a participant in the group's programme) noted, despite the physical presence of women in the Parliament, little had really changed:

[At] the moment in Kyrgyzstan, especially the participation of women in politics, the participation of women [in addressing economic issues], the participation of women in state apparatuses, yes? There's a very low number (interview, director of a women's economic empowerment organisation based in Osh, age 37, 24 February 2010).

Increasing the presence of women in formal political processes and institutions was also clearly seen as an on-going priority by donors working in the region, two of whom (Mama Cash and the Global Fund for Women) extended the group's funding for work in this area in early 2010 (field notes, 31 March 2010).

### **Case study 3: the youth-led, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights organisation**

My third case study was a 'young' organisation in both senses of the word. Established by a group of friends in 2004, it had rented its first office in 2005, and obtained official registration as an NGO in 2006. Originally registered as an organisation working for young women's rights, during my time in Bishkek, the group re-registered as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights organisation in February 2010 (see Wilkinson & Kirey 2010). Both the executive director and the majority of the staff working there were under the age of 30. The group's fairly recent establishment was to some extent a reflection of the fact that, as discussed in the previous chapter, in comparison to violence against women and women's political participation, issues of sexuality, sexual rights, and LGBT rights have only recently come to be seen as legitimate, specific concerns within development, beyond a more narrow focus on women's reproductive rights, HIV prevention, and preventing sexual violence (Ilkharacan & Jolly 2007).

At the time of this research, the group was engaged in a range of advocacy and training activities, with the aim of: lobbying for the rights of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan; raising awareness of the existence of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan; and providing training sessions on LGBT issues to targeted groups such as police recruits, journalists, medical staff, and human rights defenders. In addition, they provided a range of support services to members of the LGBT community in Bishkek, including emergency accommodation in a small shelter, the services of a psychologist, help with medical costs, various support groups, and outreach activities. Finally, in the event of a member of the LGBT

community facing violence or assault (unfortunately an all too frequent occurrence), they would provide moral support, accompany the person to the police station, and pay for legal representation.<sup>12</sup> Given that estrangement from natal families and communities is often a sad fact of life for young LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan (either by choice, or because the young person has been ‘thrown out’), many of the young people involved with the LGBT group both as employees and as clients also relied on it to provide them with a sense of belonging, and furthermore with the practical assistance and support that an extended family might otherwise have provided, in regard, for instance, to finding somewhere to live, or gaining access to the right medical care.

The organisation was gaining visibility within the NGO sector in Bishkek, but not in wider society, where it, and the issues it worked on, remained for the most part invisible. However, the group had a strong, visible presence outside the country, as part of a number of international LGBT and human rights networks; for instance, it was affiliated to both the Asia and Europe sections of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA), and had collaborated with Human Rights Watch on a research report into violence and discrimination against lesbian and bisexual women and transgender men (Human Rights Watch 2008).

In contrast to case study groups 1 and 2, this organisation was not run by the people who had established it. Of these three original founders, one had left the country, one remained involved as a member of its board (which appeared to play an active role in the organisation’s management), and one was in regular contact and often participated in events and campaigns, but did not work for the organisation or sit on its board. Board members were elected by the groups members who met once a year at a general meeting (*obschee sobranie*).

Since 2004, the organisation had had four different directors, all but one of them younger than 30. As the current director explained to me, finding someone from within the LGBT community to take on the role had repeatedly presented a challenge:

I was sort of put, not really under pressure, but sort of, like, I had no other choice [...] there was nobody else who would want to take this job, or would have the qualifications, or at least the potential. I mean, there is a lot of potential, I don’t mean to say that people here don’t have potential, but potential is not enough, you also have to have some certain skills, some certain experience.... I couldn’t just leave ... let down the organisation that I like so much ... the ideals, the principles. So I had to agree (interview with executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 25, 9 December 2009).

It was evident from my conversations with the director that she was passionately committed to the organisation, and, as she says above, to its ‘ideals and principles’. But she did not see her future

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<sup>12</sup> See Human Rights Watch (2008) for some indication as to why these various services were necessary.

there, recognising that she would 'burn out' if she remained and maintained her current level of engagement, and spoke instead of moving on to further study and a career in journalism or publishing. Indeed, in the autumn of 2010, she stepped down from the position of director and left the country to study in Europe, while remaining involved as a consultant.

In addition to being youth-led and having a high turnover of leadership, the group also differed in regard to the (lack of) hierarchy within the organisation. For instance, there seemed a genuine commitment to involving all members of staff in decision-making, witnessed in the way the decision was taken to allow me to spend time with the group. In addition, it was clear from the way that other members of staff interacted with her that they did not view the director as an authority figure, or someone with the power to command and direct their activities. For instance, when speaking to her in Russian, all used the familiar 'ty' form for 'you', rather than the formal 'Vy'; they also did not use her Russian patronymic, or the Kyrgyz suffix '-eje', which denotes seniority in women. By contrast, at the other two organisations, the director or chair was always addressed as 'Vy', either using her first name and patronymic or '-eje', while she addressed staff members just by their first names, and used 'ty' with younger members of staff.

Visiting the group's office was often a chaotic experience: there would usually be a large number of people there (although, invariably, not the person I would have arranged to meet that day), and it was very difficult to work out who was a member of staff, and who was a client of the organisation. This was hardly surprising, given that the staff and clients were drawn from the same pool of young LGBT people, and a few allies; indeed, many of the staff members had originally come to the organisation through its social activities, or because they had been in need of help. This again represented a feature distinguishing the group from the other two organisations: while personal experience may have been one of the reasons for the women working at the women's crisis centre or the umbrella organisation choosing to work for those particular organisations, they now firmly saw themselves in the position of administering help to others. With the LGBT rights group, the line between giving and receiving help was far more blurred, and affiliation with the organisation was primarily on the basis of identity, rather than (or in addition to) professional commitment.

## **Alignments and tensions among gender-focused NGOs**

There is this stereotype that there is no female solidarity, no solidarity between these groups, that we can't work together. That's actually being heightened by the competition for donor funding, and that's a real tragedy (interview with NGO leader and academic, female, mid-40s, 28 October 2009).

In a 2007 essay on the women's movement in the Kyrgyz Republic, Moldosheva describes the three categories of groups that make up what she terms the 'women's movement': mainstream groups working on 'traditional' women's issues, such as violence against women,<sup>13</sup> women's unemployment, reproductive health, and women's social and political participation; alternative groups, promoting for instance the rights of Muslim women, disabled women, or lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LBT) women; and new 'citizen' groups that had emerged during the political upheaval of March 2005.<sup>14</sup> Applying this schema to my three case study groups, case study 1 – the crisis centre – would fall into the 'mainstream' category, while case study 3 – the LGBT rights organisation – would fall into the 'alternative' category. Case study 2, the umbrella group, appeared to occupy a less clear-cut position (given the fact that it represented a wider membership), although its sphere of activities could be said to fall into the 'mainstream' category.

As I interviewed and spent time with activists involved in different NGOs in Bishkek, including my three case study groups, I became aware of the perception that there was a considerable amount of tension between these different categories, and struggle regarding whose activities were seen as legitimate in helping to realise an improvement in women's rights in Kyrgyzstan. As my respondent above intimated, in part this may relate to competition for funding and external support.

Just as in wider civil society, this lack of unity was remarked upon negatively by many of my respondents who were located within what Moldosheva classes as mainstream groups, including some who worked for the women's crisis centre (case study group 1) as well as activists working with other groups that I interviewed, with few presenting the existence of divergent voices and perspectives as something positive. By contrast, representatives of 'alternative' groups (which among my respondents included those involved with my third case study group, as well as organisations working for the rights of disabled women and those living with HIV) made a point of distancing themselves from mainstream groups, and emphasising their 'alternative' perspective. Among representatives of these 'alternative groups' whom I spoke to, there was a strong sense of being outside what they saw as the 'mainstream' women's movement in Kyrgyzstan, reflecting the marginalisation of the women (and men) whom they represented in the wider society.

Well now with these organisations, it's ok. Well of course I am often at seminars, they invite me [...] And they really helped me [...] But all the same, they work with able-bodied people. But they really, well not all of them understand, yet, [disability], what it is (interview with director, disabled women's organisation, female, mid-50s, 24 March 2010).

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<sup>13</sup> What counts as 'traditional' is of course relative: as the director of the crisis centre pointed out, before the 1990s, violence against women was not an issue that *anyone* worked on.

<sup>14</sup> By the time I arrived in Bishkek in July 2009, there was little evidence to suggest that these 'new' groups had survived in any coherent form.

The director of my third case study group, the LGBT rights group, saw her group's positioning on the 'fringes' of the women's rights movement in Kyrgyzstan as reflecting what she saw as a more confrontational, 'radical' approach to challenging gender and other forms of inequality.

[There are ] NGOs that ... sort of consider us as, the... white bird in the black horde, or whatever. Because we stand out, and we have different approaches (interview with Executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study group 3), female, age 25, 9 December 2009).

She also felt that the activists involved in her group differed from 'mainstream' women's rights activists in other ways:

We're all young, and we're all very educated in a way. And independent. Not the typical type of women activists (interview with Executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 25, 9 December 2009).

The underlying prejudices that may have been contributing towards difficult relationships between 'mainstream' and 'alternative' gender-focused NGOs were never directly expressed during interviews. For instance, none of the respondents who represented 'mainstream' groups expressed disapproval of work on the rights of people living with HIV, or LGBT rights. Rather, age and different approaches to activism were the two areas used to indicate distrust of the 'other side', on the part of both mainstream and alternative groups.

I notice that, well this generation is very well qualified. [...] They don't take a step unless you pay them, and pay them well. They very, well, they value themselves. [...] Well... I don't know, now. I don't want to talk badly of young people. There are good ones, qualified, but they cost a lot (interview with Director, women's crisis centre (case study 1), female age 63, 11 December 2009).

But they are like school directors.... They have their work to do, [they do that work], and that's all. That is, they are more concerned with the process itself than the idea, than why they have gathered, what they wanted (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 29, 12 October 2009).

### **The 2008 CEDAW shadow report**

At the time of my research, the example of this tension provided most frequently was that of the controversy surrounding the drafting of the shadow reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, to accompany the official Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) report, submitted in 2008.<sup>15</sup> As the sequence of events was explained to me by several of my respondents, the original idea had been to create a coalition of NGOs to produce one, unified report; as one respondent stated, there was enthusiasm for this

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<sup>15</sup> The Kyrgyz Republic ratified CEDAW in 1997 (United Nations Treaty Collection n.d.). The country reported to the CEDAW committee in 1999 (initial report), 2004 (second periodic report), 2008 (third periodic report), and will do so again in 2014 (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.).

among gender-focused NGOs in Bishkek, once 'UNDP said they would pay for it' (interview with NGO leader and academic, female, mid-40s, 28 October 2009). However, in the end, a total of four reports were produced: one by a coalition of NGOs of the main 'mainstream' gender-focused NGOs, including my first case study group (the crisis centre); one by a group representing sex workers; one by my second case study group (the umbrella organisation); and one by my third case study group (the LGBT rights organisation).

As I noted at the time in my field notes, what was striking on reading these four reports was how they did not 'talk to each other', as I wrote. For instance, both the 'main' shadow report, and the report by my second case study group included material on violence against women and women's political representation, and yet their analyses were based on what appeared to be completely separate monitoring exercises. This was despite the fact that there was, in theory, overlap between the membership of the coalition and the umbrella group. The 'main' report (Council of NGOs 2008) is extremely comprehensive in addressing the position of women in Kyrgyzstan in regard to each of the articles of CEDAW, and in its criticism of the lack of state action (and of the official CEDAW report). However, with the exception of 'rural women' the report does not address the situation of what are usually labelled 'minority' women, nor the intersectional discrimination that they face. There is no mention, for instance, of women with disabilities, or women who are members of ethnic or religious minorities. The report by my second case study group (the umbrella group) does include the recommendation that the government should adopt special measures 'to address specific groups of women such as rural women, disabled women, and marginalized women in Kyrgyzstan',<sup>16</sup> but again, does not include any in-depth consideration of the situation of these groups of women. By contrast, the two remaining reports – on women working in the sex industry, and LGBT women – draw attention to the extreme marginalisation and discrimination faced by these groups of women, but do not explicitly connect that to the wider discrimination faced by women as a collective group in Kyrgyzstan, as highlighted in the report produced by the Council of NGOs and echoed in the report by my second case study group. Comparing these (cited and unnamed) reports, while knowing that the original plan had been to produce one, integrated report, it was tempting to conclude that there must have been some fundamental 'schism' in regard to what (or rather 'who') was considered appropriate for inclusion in a report on women in Kyrgyzstan.

This view was backed up by the accounts of some of my respondents as to what had actually happened prior to the submission of four reports, rather than one. The director of the LGBT rights group had this explanation:

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<sup>16</sup> Reference not provided to avoid identification.



The main reason why we wrote the stand-alone, alternative or shadow report for the CEDAW committee in 2008 was exactly because the mainstream women's movement didn't want to include us in their mainstream report. Because our research was too radical for them. And they didn't want to ... lose what they have already achieved by including us, I guess (interview with Executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 25, 9 December 2009).

In this, as in other conversations on the same subject, the LGBT rights group (and the issues it worked on) was positioned as having been purposefully *excluded*, as representing a danger that could destabilise and delegitimise the 'mainstream women's movement', mirroring the marginalisation of the LGBT community and the 'threat' they were taken to represent in mainstream society.

An Independent Gender Expert whom I interviewed was more explicit in her account of what had happened:

As maybe you know there was a CEDAW shadow report committee of various groups, [the LGBT rights group] wanted to be part of the shadow reporting process, there was some discussion of this and the committee decided it didn't want [them] to be part of the report because it didn't think the report should include information on 'sexual minorities' (interview with Independent Gender Expert, female, mid-40s, 19 October 2009).

When I interviewed a staff member at my second case study group, and asked her why separate reports had been written rather than one unified document, she had a more prosaic explanation, while also indicating that according to her understanding, it was the LGBT rights organisation that had wanted to write its own, separate report, and not the other way around:

There was no time to get everyone together to do one report, it just didn't work out. We wanted to, although we were working on the specific issues of violence and women in politics. I can understand why [the LGBT rights organisation] wanted to do a separate report because their issues are more specific, but we would have been happy to do a joint report with them. But it just didn't work out, we had no time (interview with Programme officer, umbrella organisation (case study 2), female, early 30s, 11 September 2009).

The more time I spent with my third case study group, the more it became clear that this position of exclusion, difference, and tension in regard to the 'mainstream women's movement' had come to constitute an important aspect of the group's identity. The group's exclusion from the drafting of the 'main' shadow CEDAW report had served to strengthen this, increasing the cynicism that many within the group felt towards the mainstream women's movement. This is not to imply that there was no hostility towards the group and what it represented, or that there were not those within the mainstream women's movement who felt that 'sexual minorities' was not an appropriate focus for activism (there clearly were). But rather, as the Independent Gender Advisor made clear when I interviewed her on this issue, the episode's significance had perhaps been over-emphasised.

[This] has blown up into a big myth that [the LGBT rights group] was somehow chucked out of 'the feminist movement' in Kyrgyzstan. Which is ridiculous, it was just a CEDAW shadow report committee, they have no power, they do not represent 'the feminist movement', because the groups on the committee are not even feminist! There's no 'us', no movement for [them] to be excluded from. They keep saying they want to be included but there is nothing for them to be included in (interview with Independent Gender Expert, female, mid-40s, 19 October 2009).

She then went on to say that in her view, this tension and the plurality of voices – and reports – that it produced was actually a very good thing.

Questions of inclusion and exclusion, of whose voice 'counts,' are of course extremely important in feminist and gender-focused activism (see for instance Mohanty 1988; Seckinelgin 2006), and I do not wish to imply that in regard to producing the CEDAW shadow report (or in other contexts), there was not a deliberate process of trying to silence the LGBT rights organisation (or the sex workers' rights organisation, who also were not included in the main coalition of NGOs) and the people and interests it represented. On one occasion, an event to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CEDAW to which a large number of women's rights activists and groups were invited, I witnessed how the group's stall was studiously avoided by all, with the exception of a handful of 'friendly' activists (field notes, 25 November 2009). Rather, as the statement above implies, the idea of a unified women's movement in Kyrgyzstan from which certain groups and themes could be excluded is clearly far more fragile than the LGBT rights organisation's narrative would imply. In addition, there were those within 'the women's movement' – not least, the gender expert quoted above – who were making very deliberate attempts to try and draw the LGBT rights organisation *into* the mainstream. Indeed, at the same CEDAW 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary event, the director of the group was invited (along with the director of a disabled women's rights organisation and a representative from a rural women's group) to unveil a quilt that had been produced to mark the anniversary, in what seemed to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the organisers (UNIFEM Kyrgyzstan) to include these 'excluded' groups.

## **Hierarchies of age, language, and access to donors**

As discussed above, tensions within the gender-focused NGO sector were often expressed in terms of the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups from an assumed mainstream, with 'alternative' groups such as the LGBT rights group (case study 3) automatically assumed (by themselves and allies) to be positioned as excluded. However, the more time I spent with the three case study groups, the more I came to realise that these processes of inclusion and exclusion were not so clear cut. Different hierarchies were operating, within which, in some cases, it was the more mainstream groups – the crisis centre and the umbrella organisation – that occupied a less favourable position.

In addition, *within* each organisation, hierarchies were not necessarily as clear-cut as first impressions might suggest – or, in the case of the LGBT rights group, were not necessarily absent.

## **Age**

Hierarchies of age are extremely strong in Kyrgyzstan, with deference accorded to those belonging to older generations, and the expectation that younger people will not challenge the leadership, advice, or commands of their elders, be they parents or colleagues. Cokgezen (2004) writes of this expectation of unquestioning deference as being a key contributing factor to high levels of corruption in the country, as it renders it almost impossible for younger people to confront corrupt and inappropriate behaviour on the part of their elders. The role of older women in pressuring young women to accept forced marriages also plays on this enforced deference, with accounts of bride kidnapping including examples of the groom's grandmother or another older, female relative lying down in the doorway of the room in which the abducted woman is being kept, making it impossible for her to leave without stepping over the elderly woman, an action that would be a sign of great disrespect (Human Rights Watch 2006).

As one of my respondents noted, this assumption of deference was reproduced in relations between gender-focused NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, with the relative youth of those active in my third case study group and other 'alternative' groups cited as a reason not to take them seriously:

[M]aybe you have noticed, being around, for example in the women's movement. But there are always these women that are like over 35, or over 40, you know, who a lot of the time followed this sort of stereotypical, traditional ideas of age discrimination, in a way, and stuff like that. So our age is a disadvantage for us as activists, because we're not considered to be, you know, serious enough. Like they think that whatever we're proposing is radical because we're young, and that's why it doesn't have to be considered as anything serious... (interview with Executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

In this way, relative youth became yet another way to silence the group, and to delegitimise its contribution, as far as the group's executive director was concerned.

Age hierarchies were also very evident at the large CEDAW 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary event that I attended (mentioned above), where a series of elderly and middle-aged women gave speeches, with one former politician shouting out that 'the younger generation are great!', while giving no sign of any desire to pass her microphone over to a representative of 'the younger generation' (field notes, 25

November 2009).<sup>17</sup> The only young woman who spoke at any length did so on behalf of the (male) ombudsman, who had declined to attend in person.

That said, hierarchies of age did not always, necessarily, favour those who were older. The ageing leadership within the NGO sector in general, and the gender-focused NGOs in particular, was often cited by my respondents as a threat to the healthy development of 'civil society' in Kyrgyzstan (see Tiulegenov 2008; United Nations 2008).

We did a leadership study last year: is there a new leadership emerging? No. Young people are not able to get on, move up in the NGO sector in the way we thought they would (interview with expatriate Regional Advisor, international NGO, male, mid-50s, 20 July 2009).

As the people at the top get older, the soul of civil society is dying (interview with NGO leader and academic, female, mid-40s, 28 October 2009).

For these interlocutors, both of whom occupied positions of some authority and no little respect within civil society,<sup>18</sup> nurturing and promoting younger voices, and challenging the on-going dominance of the older generation of NGO leaders within the gender-focused and wider NGO sector was a priority in their work, and necessary to ensure the healthy development of the sector. The international NGO mentioned in the first quotation was at that stage running a long-term youth leadership programme, with the specific aims of both bringing up a new generation of potential NGO leaders, and of challenging very fixed ideas about what qualities make for a good leader (age seniority being one of them), as another member of staff made clear:

We found that many of the participants have a very fixed idea about what qualities and skills a leader needs to have, and felt that they couldn't compete with those already in leadership positions in NGOs because they didn't have those qualities. ... Hence the emphasis on new technologies; it's training these participants in skills that existing leaders don't have (interview with Research and Information Officer, male, early 30s, international NGO, 5 August 2012).

In regard to the LGBT rights group in particular, the NGO Leader and Academic (who I interviewed on 28 October 2009), the Senior Gender Advisor at an international development agency (who I interviewed on 20 August 2009), and the Independent Gender Consultant (who I interviewed on 19 October 2009) all very much saw themselves as 'champions' of the group, and the new ideas and approaches that they saw it as representing, as a youth-led group as much as an organisation working on sexual rights. The three of them together had been responsible for organising the CEDAW 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary event, and while this was very much dominated by older voices, as mentioned above, the executive director of the LGBT rights group was invited onto the stage at one

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<sup>17</sup> Age was certainly not the only hierarchy evident at this event. The same former politician also noted how pleased she was that none of the attendees were wearing *hijab*.

<sup>18</sup> The expatriate regional advisor had been living and working in Bishkek for over ten years.

point (along with representatives from other non-mainstream groups), while one of the three, acting as compere, made explicit reference to the importance of recognising a new wave of women activists (and to women of 'different sexualities') (field notes, 25 November 2009).

Finally, the presumption of age-based deference that I noted among the older women NGO leaders, including the director of the women's crisis centre (case study 1) and the chair of the umbrella organisation (case study 2) did not necessarily mean that they had no regard at all for younger activists, and younger voices within their organisations. The crisis centre even had a youth wing, made up of the daughters and sons of the women working there, and their friends. This youth wing took part in a very different range of activities to those of the main organisation, including Forum Theatre performances in local schools, to encourage children to think about issues such as domestic violence and bride kidnapping in a more open and critical way.<sup>19</sup> While they and their activities were kept on a tight rein, and they could do nothing without the approval of the director, she seemed more than happy to leave them to generate their own ideas for action.

At the umbrella organisation, in our conversations, the chair repeatedly mentioned her commitment to 'putting younger staff forward, building their skills, their capacity' (interview with chair, umbrella organisation (case study 2), 11 September 2009). This was backed up by another member of staff, who said that 'in our [organisation], [the chair] is democratic, she encourages us to increase our skills, to represent the [organisation]' (interview with Programme Officer, umbrella organisation (case study 2), female, mid-30s, 11 September 2009). This included requiring them to give presentations on behalf of the organisation at regional and international meetings where the group was participating; in early 2010, her forthcoming presentation at a panel at the CSW in New York was filling the programme assistant with particular dread (field notes, 8 February 2010, 11 February 2010). In addition, the chair appeared to be making concrete efforts in her praxis to acknowledge and challenge some of the other hierarchies within the gender-focused NGO sector. At the meeting of members that I attended, the chair made a point of asking the youngest person present (who up until that point had not said a word) for her views. Further, at the same meeting, she also ensured that the views of a representative of a disabled women's association, and of a group working on behalf of women drug users and former prisoners (who again was much younger than most of the other participants), were heard; again, up until that point, both had said very little. In addition, the chair and the two other members of staff had accompanied a delegation of 12 representatives of member organisations to the CSW, many of whom came from small, rural-based organisations, and

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<sup>19</sup> Forum Theatre has been used in many contexts as a means of raising awareness of a particular social issue, and of engaging audience members to address the issue more critically. The technique was pioneered by the Brazilian pedagogue Augusto Boal. For more information, see <http://dramaresource.com/strategies/forum-theatre> (accessed 21 December 2012).

most of whom were participating in an international-level meeting for the first time; as I wrote in my field notes, the chair felt that it was 'important for them to see and take part in these things' (field notes, 18 March 2010).

## Language

Observing how those working in the three different groups interacted with their colleagues, and with the wider world, I came to realise that the presence or otherwise of different language speakers also determined relationships and hierarchies.

As discussed in chapter 2, 'russification' effectively became state policy across the Soviet Union, with Russian designated the language of intra-ethnic communication throughout the Union. This gave rise to what Dave (2004, p.126) terms 'asymmetrical bilingualism', whereby non-Russians had little option but to gain proficiency in Russian if they wished to get ahead in Soviet society, but Russian speakers living in the Kyrgyz SSR (and elsewhere) had little incentive to learn the 'local' language. Since independence, attempts to promote the Kyrgyz language have been central to the project of nation-building in the country,<sup>20</sup> and as Dave (2004) notes, proficiency in Kyrgyz has now become a prerequisite for those wishing to get ahead; this is particularly the case for public figures, in terms of strengthening their legitimacy.<sup>21</sup> However, while Kyrgyz has been recognised as the state language since 1993, Russian was given the status of 'official' language in a constitutional amendment made in 2000 (Landau & Kellner-Heinkele 2001), and included again in the new constitution, passed by referendum in 2010 (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2010). Proficiency in Russian remains important for professional advancement, and is vital for those operating at the regional level, as Russian remains the *lingua franca* across Central Asia (Radnitz 2010, p.111; Kirmse 2009); as such, it is effectively a requirement for those working in the NGO sector. Bishkek remains, effectively, a bilingual city, with most people living there either monolingual Russian speakers (including many ethnic Kyrgyz) or bilingual; as Dave notes, linguistic divisions strongly mirror urban/rural divisions, with monolingual Kyrgyz speakers overwhelmingly dominant in rural areas, and belonging to the more economically depressed strata of society (Dave 2004).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For a full discussion of language policy in Kyrgyzstan before and since 1991, see Dave (2004) and Landau and Kellner-Heinkele (2001).

<sup>21</sup> This has been particularly noticeable since the violence that occurred in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, after which nationalist rhetoric became more mainstream in the media and politics, and accusations of not being authentically Kyrgyz became a key way of attacking opponents (see Mukhametrakhimova 2011).

<sup>22</sup> At the same time, with so many families now reliant on migrant remittances, the ability to speak Russian is rising in importance among the younger generation in rural areas, and parents are now choosing to send their children to Russian-medium schools (where such schools are available) (Ferrando 2009). High rates of cyclical migration to Russia mean that many young people also go on to acquire proficiency in Russian in their 20s and 30s, as a result of spending time working in Russia.

The LGBT rights organisation was a Russian-speaking office, with, at that time, only three staff members who spoke fluent Kyrgyz. This put them at a disadvantage in certain situations, including dealing with their clients, many of whom were migrants from rural areas of the country, and were more comfortable speaking Kyrgyz. This had the unfortunate effect of excluding monolingual Kyrgyz speakers at some of their training sessions and events, or limiting their opportunities for participation; hardly a positive outcome for an organisation that consciously sought to be inclusive and to 'reach out' to the most marginalised members of the LGBT community.<sup>23</sup> For instance, in December 2009, I attended a three-day, residential leadership-training course run by the group, which included participants from all over Kyrgyzstan. All the training sessions and break-out activities were delivered in Russian, and it became apparent over the course of the first day's activities that three of the participants were not able to follow what was going on. No provision had been made for translation, meaning that other Kyrgyz-speaking participants had to volunteer to provide translation on an ad hoc basis, limiting their own participation as well as that of the three Kyrgyz speakers (field notes from LGBT rights group (case study 3) training workshop, 16-20 December 2009).

The group's effective monolingualism was the result of the fact that most of the people working there were not ethnic Kyrgyz,<sup>24</sup> and as a rule, non-Kyrgyz Russian speakers do not speak Kyrgyz, particularly if they live in Bishkek (they have no need to, and many have no inclination to, either). But while it put the organisation at a disadvantage in regard to dealing with part of their client base, and reinforced an image of the organisation as elite, urban, and 'not Kyrgyz', it did bring advantages as well. Presenting as a Russian-speaking organisation made integration into regional human rights and LGBT rights networks covering Central Asia and other countries of the former Soviet Union automatic, as Russian remains the regional language of communication. It also meant they could present as a 'professional' outfit, for as Stefan Kirmse writes in the context of youth groups in Osh, southern Kyrgyzstan, Russian remains the language of business, and of professionalism (Kirmse 2009, p. 297). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, having an office full of Russian speakers also facilitated communication with donors, and made applying for funding far more straightforward. All donors with dedicated programmes working in Central Asia and/or the former Soviet Union would, as a matter of routine, have at least one Russian-speaking programme officer, and accept funding applications and project reports written in Russian. As one of the Kyrgyz speakers participating at the leadership training mentioned above pointed out, this put small, provincial groups like his (a self-help group for men who have sex with men (MSM), based in one of the country's provincial cities),

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<sup>23</sup> It must be stressed that all the group's written informational materials were available in Kyrgyz as well as Russian.

<sup>24</sup> At that time, staff included ethnic Russians, Koreans, Germans, and an Uzbek, as well as staff of mixed ethnicity.

that do not have anyone among their members able to write and converse confidently in Russian, at a distinct disadvantage in regard to accessing donor funding and support (before, he noted, you get on to the issue of lack of access to a computer, let alone the internet) (field notes from LGBT rights group leadership training, 16-20 November 2009).<sup>25</sup> Surprisingly, to me, language was never raised as an issue in discussions regarding outreach activities and inclusion, even during the soul-searching that went on regarding where the organisation was going, and what its purpose should be. In addition, the potential political implications of being seen as a 'Russian-speaking organisation' did not seem to raise concern.

In linguistic terms, the LGBT rights organisation was also at a distinct advantage because it had among its staff and consultants several fluent English speakers (including the executive director), all of whom had graduated from the English-medium American University of Central Asia, and had spent time living in the United States as teenagers, under the Flex exchange programme.<sup>26</sup> Again, this facilitated their access to donors, and their integration into international human rights networks.

This was also the case at the umbrella organisation (case study 2), where the chair spoke fluent English, also having spent time in the US as a visiting academic. Her excellent English and confidence in promoting the group at international fora and within international networks meant that like the LGBT rights group, the umbrella group had a strong and visible international presence. However, in contrast to the LGBT rights organisation, in its dealings within Kyrgyzstan, the umbrella group was very much a dual language organisation. At the office, the chair and her two colleagues (who were all ethnic Kyrgyz) switched constantly between Russian and Kyrgyz. In the seminars that I attended, where representatives of their member organisations were participating, facilitators and participants again switched easily between the two languages (sometimes in the same sentence), with little regard for the fact that several of the participants did not speak Kyrgyz, and using, it seemed to me, whichever language they were comfortable with, or best fitted the topic under discussion. For instance, discussion of legislation would usually be in Russian, while more personal reactions (for instance, to cases of domestic violence) would often be in Kyrgyz.

The fact that the umbrella organisation was a dual-lingual organisation assisted in legitimising it among its mainly rural membership organisations, as well as helping to boost its national profile. In effect, it acted as a conduit between these groups and the outside world, evidenced in the chair's

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<sup>25</sup> This would indicate that inadvertently or otherwise, donor policies in the region, or perhaps, the practicalities of implementing programmes in this region, are in fact serving to *reinforce* Russian as the dominant language in development, creating another layer of exclusion for smaller, rural NGOs to access outside support, given that these groups are less likely to have a confident Russian speaker on staff.

<sup>26</sup> See <http://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/future-leaders-exchange> for further details (last accessed 6 September 2013).



deliberate policy of bringing representatives of its membership to participate in events in Bishkek, and taking them abroad to participate in international fora. While we never discussed the matter directly, it seemed to me that for the chair, using Kyrgyz as well as Russian, particularly at public events, was a conscious part of this process, a means of effecting their participation and contribution to wider debates on the issues they worked on.

Of course, a more prosaic reason for the umbrella group's bilingualism was the fact that all the staff members were ethnic Kyrgyz. However, as I found at the crisis centre and at the LGBT rights organisation, Kyrgyz ethnicity was not necessarily a marker for being able to speak and understand the Kyrgyz language. Like the LGBT rights group, the crisis centre's staff were multi-ethnic. While the director and most of the staff were ethnic Kyrgyz, the two psychologists who worked with the organisation were ethnic Russian and ethnic Korean, and they, along with one of the Kyrgyz senior consultants, could not speak or understand much Kyrgyz. However, unlike the LGBT rights group, the main language spoken in the office was Kyrgyz, with little allowance made for these three members of staff.

When I interviewed the director of the crisis centre, we discussed the issue of language, and she revealed that at a personal level, she had made a deliberate decision to become a Kyrgyz speaker, as she saw this as important in regard to building relationships and trust with potential clients:

I am a Russian-speaking person, and I understood that I needed to master my native language [*Kyrgyz*], speak it, so that if I was going to go out and talk to these women, in public, I needed to know my own native language properly. I put my emphasis on that, and now I am proud, that at this age, I [can now speak both languages to the same level] (interview with director of women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, 63 years old, 11 December 2009).

The director appeared to be very aware of the implications of not having Kyrgyz speakers on her staff for engaging with the women the crisis centre set out to help. For her, it was a source of concern that the two psychologists employed by the organisation were not Kyrgyz speakers, and to mitigate this, she had taken on the task of offering consultations herself.<sup>27</sup> I asked her if she felt that this was important to the centre's clients:

Yes! Yes, yes, yes. And several, well when I go out, they come to me, they say they want to sign up to see me (interview with director of women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, 63 years old, 11 December 2009).

The crisis centre had a much higher national profile than either the LGBT rights group or the umbrella group, evident in the frequency with which the director was invited to participate as an

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<sup>27</sup> The director had also completed a degree in psychology.

expert on women's rights in media debates on a wide range of social issues. The fact that she could participate in such debates in Kyrgyz was a definite bonus, while the perception that the organisation was Kyrgyz speaking, by extension of its association with the director, boosted its legitimacy not just in regard to reaching out to clients, but also with the wider, Kyrgyz-speaking public. Speaking of a recent media appearance, the director noted, 'I was live, for an hour and a half, in Kyrgyz, and there were lots of questions, and it was easy for me'.

The crisis centre, at the instigation of its director, had embarked on a deliberate strategy to become a Kyrgyz-speaking organisation, but this had been at the expense of building the organisation's English-language capacity. Speaking of her own decision to focus on Kyrgyz, the director spoke of this in terms of having made an active choice between Kyrgyz and English:

I had the opportunity [to learn English], when I entered the sector, they even gave us teachers. And I had [to choose], because learning two languages in parallel, that's hard (interview with director of women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, 63 years old, 11 December 2009).

While she did not regret the choice that she had made to learn Kyrgyz over English, the director was acutely aware of the disadvantage at which this put her – and by extension, the centre – in regard to participating at the international level, particularly as no-one else on the staff spoke more than elementary English.

I regret that I don't know some international language, English, so that I could ... at that level, contribute my opinion, or something. It's as if I have no hands.... (interview with director of women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, 63 years old, 11 December 2009).

But, just as she had chosen Kyrgyz over English for herself, the director was reluctant to seek out and take on a new English-speaking member of staff just for the sake of it. Rather, she preferred to work with international volunteers (such as myself), who could act as interpreters when it came to talking to representatives of donor organisations who did not speak Russian. For her, the 'concrete mission' (as she put it) that her existing colleagues were fulfilling through their work was far more important than the inconvenience presented by not having an English speaker on staff.

## **Donors**

A third area where this idea of shifting hierarchies can clearly be seen is that of relations with the donor organisations upon which all three of my case study groups were dependent. In chapter 7 I will consider whether, and how, this dependency shaped the activities and motivations of individual activists and the groups they worked with. But here, I look at how my three case study groups interacted with their donors at the organisational level.

At the time of this research, the three case study groups were all well established as ‘trusted’ partner organisations.<sup>28</sup> This meant that they had received funding in the past and successfully implemented projects, accounting for the money that they had spent and able to show the outcomes of their project work, and could be counted upon to do the same again. The crisis centre (case study 1) and the LGBT rights organisation (case study 3) at the time had grants to fund their work and the salaries of their staff, while the chair of the umbrella organisation (case study 2) succeeded in attracting funding during the period that I spent with the group. However, despite sharing the same ‘trusted’ status, the three groups had very different ways of interacting with the donors with whom they worked.

The late 2000s saw the withdrawal of several important donors to Kyrgyzstan or a reduction in the size of their programmes in the country, on the grounds that money would be better invested in other parts of the world. The reason cited was usually that Central Asia as a region was no longer strategically important – given that so little was being achieved in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and it was so difficult to operate in these countries, and that Kazakhstan was already an upper middle-income country, and hence, no longer in need of development assistance. Among these were two donors that had been at the forefront in providing money to fund gender-focused work, SIDA (the Swedish Development Agency), and the Dutch fund HIVOS, which was in the process of terminating its engagement in the region as I was carrying out my research.

For the crisis centre, the fact that one of their donors, HIVOS, was withdrawing from Kyrgyzstan was a source of constant anxiety within the organisation, despite the fact that alternative funding was already in place, and that they had some support from the state (putting them in a far more secure position than the other two groups, and hence, in a better position to survive and develop). As this quotation from the director indicates, this fear stemmed from the group’s considerable outlays in providing shelter and support to victims of violence, and a sense of responsibility to the women who came to them for help:

HIVOS has already been [here] for 5 years ... this is already the fourth year [they have] supported us, but unfortunately they are finishing. And of course, we are frightened, because here we have to work round the clock, people need salaries, food, it’s very difficult, because, well the state only helps out with the premises. People believe in us, and to close the organisation.... (interview with director of women’s crisis centre (case study 1), female, aged 63, 11 December 2009).

This anxiety was played out in the way that the director and her staff interacted with representatives of donor organisations (already supporting the centre, or expressing an interest in doing so). Such

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<sup>28</sup> See Hemment (2004; 2007) and Mandel (2002) for a discussion of ‘trusted’ NGOs.

conversations would include long accounts of all the things that the centre had achieved during its existence, and were invariably followed by a close analysis of whether or not the right things had been said, and the right impression had been given. At the end of one such conversation, where I had translated between the director and someone representing 'the Spanish Fund', I noted that 'at the end of the conversation the director appeared very relieved. She said she had been very worried about next year's funding' (field notes, 22 September 2009). This was despite the fact that it became apparent during the conversation that 'the Spanish Fund' had already committed to supporting the centre until 2011.

This anxiety was understandable, given the high running costs of the centre's shelter and the fact that the organisation had a large staff. And yet, it stood in contrast to the evidence that both the director, and the other paid member of staff whom I interviewed, gave me in regard to the organisation's future capacity to continue operating without donor support. Indeed, of the three case study groups, they were the only one that appeared to have a plan in place already as to how they would keep going in the event of donor funding no longer being available at all. As the director explained, the crisis centre already had a programme training volunteers to take on some of the tasks at the shelter, with a view to keeping services going in the event of their running out of money:

Well now ... we are preparing volunteers, so that they will be able to [work] on the helpline [...] and supervise at the shelter. So. We will continue by any means to offer [assistance] (interview with director, women's crisis centre (case study 1), female, age 63, 11 December 2009).

As she said later on in the interview, 'We won't abandon everything just because of money, we will fulfil our mission.' Further, the centre was looking to strengthen its cooperation with the city authorities. The other paid member of staff whom I interviewed saw this as the best means of ensuring future sustainability:

... our organisation, it understands that in that situation [*of donor withdrawal*], the only way that we can work is on our own resources, Kyrgyz [resources], and of course that means support from the state. Because in itself, in general, it is expensive work that we do, financially (interview with a consultant at women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

Financially, my second case study, the umbrella group, was in a very precarious position when I first established contact with them, with no core funding at all, and project funding only covering the salary of the most junior member of staff, the programme assistant. But in contrast to the crisis centre, this did not seem to be a source of great anxiety, either to the chair, or the other members of staff. Certainly, this must in part have been due to the fact that the group did not provide services upon which others outside the organisation were reliant. Furthermore, the implication was that the

employees were in a position to manage a few months without receiving a salary. But it was also clear that there had been many 'lean' periods in the past, when the organisation had had to manage with very little money coming in (and staff had not been paid), but had been able to continue its activities. That said, when I spoke about this with the chair a few months later, by which time funding had been secured, she made it clear that this had been a far from ideal set up:

[The chair] also said that she was so glad that she is now able to pay the staff properly. She was so impressed that everyone stayed last year, especially Z who had not been there for very long (field notes, case study 2, 18 March 2010).

In contrast to the crisis centre's director's understandable, but perhaps unwarranted, anxiety and desire to placate 'the donors', and notwithstanding the umbrella group's precarious financial situation, the chair's attitude towards representatives of donor organisations was highly adversarial. As she told me one day at the group's office, the chair felt that she had the same duty to hold donor organisations to account as she did to hold the organs of the state accountable, particularly in regard to their commitments to gender mainstreaming and women's rights.

[The chair] says that she is always firm, direct [...] with international organisations here who are not fulfilling their 'head office' gender commitments: 'why can't you provide me with gender disaggregated data? Where are your indicators? Your organisation has a commitment to gender mainstreaming, why isn't this being carried out?' (field notes, case study 2, 18 March 2010).

This was most evident at a national-level CSO forum (held in Bishkek in early April 2010), where she repeatedly – and forcefully – pressed the donor representatives present (from the EU, Open Society Institute, and UNDP, among others) to elaborate on their admittedly vague statements regarding aid effectiveness, transparency, and donor–civil society cooperation (minutes from national-level CSO forum, Bishkek, 3-5 April 2010). In addition, the chair herself straddled the divide between NGO and donor, as a member of the board of the US-based Global Fund for Women, further blurring the assumed boundary between the NGO sector and the donors who support it, but also indicating the level of access that the group enjoyed to donor-level conversations and strategising.

At this time, the LGBT rights organisation (case study 3) was not facing any financial difficulties, as it had a long-term grant from the Dutch LGBT rights fund, COC, as well as smaller grants from the Open Society Institute and HIVOS. But again, as with the umbrella group, the prospect of this money running out did not seem to present much anxiety, in the way that it did with the crisis centre:

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that without that money ... there would still be [your group]?  
RESPONDENT: [...] We are strong enough, we have enough resources... We already have five years' experience, of work, [that's not going anywhere], and... Money will be there. Not in the same amount, and not of course of the same quality, as now (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), female, age 29, 12 October 2009).

In part reflecting this lack of anxiety and, perhaps, the belief expressed above that ‘Money will be there’, the LGBT rights group as an organisation again enjoyed a very different relationship with COC, their principal donor. The COC representatives who visited the group during my time in Bishkek clearly saw themselves in the role of mentor – and friend – to this young organisation, and this was also how the staff appeared to see them in turn. The visit that took place while I was there included a lengthy (by all accounts) session on how to separate friendships from working relationships (an issue for many of the group’s employees), followed by a spirited social afternoon in honour of Nooruz<sup>29</sup> involving multi-lingual charades and a great deal of cake, which started before the COC representatives had even turned up, because, ‘as someone said, this hadn’t been organised for their benefit’ (field notes, 22 March 2010). The contrast between this seemingly relaxed and mutually enjoyable atmosphere (and the ease of communication and access that it represented), and that of either the confrontational approach of the umbrella group’s chair or the anxiety that accompanied any encounter with ‘the donors’ on the part of the crisis centre’s employees could not have been more pronounced.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, a consideration of three case studies, along with the wider gender-focused NGO sector in Bishkek, has shown that the reality of how gender-focused NGOs operate, interact, and present themselves is often far more complex than the ‘myths’ that have grown up around NGOs in the developing world in general, and in Kyrgyzstan in particular. Behind ‘disunity’ and ‘fragmentation’ there are strategic decisions being made as to when and on what issues to align and collaborate. Behind ‘donor dependency’ there are friendships, confrontations, and attempts to diversify sources of funding. Behind the image of the all-powerful woman NGO leader are NGO directors committed to providing opportunities to their younger staff and making their organisations more inclusive and representative. And behind an apparent fixed demarcation between ‘mainstream’ and ‘marginalised’ there are complex and shifting processes of inclusion and exclusion, which I have explored in relation to age, language, and access to donors.

In the next two chapters, I will move from the organisational level to the individual level, to consider how being a ‘gender activist’ and gendered activism is performed and experienced in this organisational, discursive, and policy environment.

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<sup>29</sup> Nooruz is Persian New Year, celebrated across Central Asia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Iran on or around 21 March.

## 6. Gender and activism: respondents' experiences and perspectives

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In this chapter, I move from the organisational level to the individual level, to assess my respondents' views on activism, what motivates it, and what it means. 'Activists' appear frequently in critical development and feminist literature, as well as in policy papers and campaign reports published by international development organisations, donors, and intergovernmental organisations. They are applauded for their role in advocating on behalf of the rights of others, for pressing governments and parliaments to alter legislation in favour of the poor and the oppressed, and for providing services to vulnerable groups who would otherwise fall through the net. Women activists are singled out for special attention, tasked with the particular roles of fighting for gender equality and women's rights. But in these accounts, the 'activist' often becomes anonymised – and on occasion, instrumentalised – the primary tool for bringing about progressive social change. In an attempt to de-anonymise 'the activist', in this chapter, I seek to use my respondents' answers to the question 'what, for you, is activism?' to engage with three themes that emerge in some of the development and feminist literature on activism, and how these relate to my respondents' lived experiences of being activists within civil society in Kyrgyzstan today. These three themes are: activism as 'active citizenship' that goes beyond a binary relationship between the individual and the state; the particular ways that women's activism (or activism) are characterised; and what kinds of practice 'count' as activism. I then go on to consider my respondents' answers to another related question, 'would you say that you are a feminist?'

### **Is 'active citizenship' the right framework for looking at civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan?**

... the third sector is a project of persuasion, one that has sought to transform purportedly dependent and politically passive Soviets into active citizens, savvy consumers, claimers of rights and defenders of their interests (Hemment 2004, p. 217).

The language of 'active citizenship' can be found in materials produced by donor organisations working in Kyrgyzstan, including those funding gender-focused NGOs, as well as in critical feminist and development studies literature, as detailed in chapter 2. For instance, in its outline of priorities in regard to work on gender equality and women's rights, the Dutch fund HIVOS (which at the time of my research was supporting all three of my case study groups, as well as other gender-focused NGOs) states: 'There is need for cutting-edge activism that alerts citizens and brings about public

outrage engaging large numbers of citizens, women and men, with the violation of women's rights and gender inequalities' (HIVOS 2006, p. 19). As the direct beneficiaries of HIVOS and other donor agencies committed to supporting 'active citizens', and being directly involved in a variety of advocacy and service delivery activities with the aim of 'addressing problems arising from rapid social change' (as articulated by Egerton & Mullan 2008, p. 147), my respondents could be classed as 'active citizens', as understood within development. But was that how they saw themselves?

Some of the answers that my respondents gave to the question 'what does activism mean to you?' did illustrate a keen sense of the individual feeling that their activism was contributing directly to positive social change, and in some cases, that they were involved in claiming 'the right to have rights'. This certainly seems to be case for this respondent as she claims the rights of herself and other lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people to be heard, to be visible, and to be accepted by wider society, in the face of a denial of those rights:

Activism, it is to participate in processes of change, that's what we say. And to not just talk about it [amongst ourselves] but to talk about it everywhere, that we are here, and not to talk in a whisper. It's to say loudly, that we are here, that we are good, that we are not rotten, that we are not sick. And to participate in life [to the full]. That's it, that's what activism is to me (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 37, 9 October 2009).

This respondent's references to raising her voice, and to participating in life and 'processes of change' to the full, indicate her awareness that without these actions, there will be little likelihood of the situation for LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan changing. They also reflect the underlying reality of the denial of many basic citizenship rights to LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan, which include de facto and de jure restrictions on the right to employment, education, healthcare, freedom of movement, identity (and by extension, the right to vote), and protection from violence and discrimination (Human Rights Watch 2008).

In her introduction to a 2005 book on inclusive citizenship, Kabeer argues that for groups effectively denied citizenship rights (of which the LGBT community in Kyrgyzstan could be taken as an example), '...membership of the nation-state often means little to its members, compared to other forms of sub-national communities with which they identify and through which they exercise their claims and obligations' (Kabeer 2005b, p.21). But in fact for this respondent citizenship was most closely associated with passports, patriotism, and nationality; i.e., the nation state:

INTERVIEWER: So what does citizenship mean to you?



RESPONDENT: It means to belong to some state. I am a citizen of Kirgizia.<sup>1</sup> I am not a citizen of Bishkek, I am a citizen of Kirgizia, that's what citizenship means to me. Because I live in a particular territory, and that's all (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 37, 9 October 2009).

This respondent was not the only one to see citizenship exclusively in these terms, although the following respondent (who also worked for the LGBT rights group, but who was several years younger) does infer an understanding of citizenship as a more embedded, localised state of being.

Citizenship? [...] Ah, well it's some kind of ... passport. That gets in the way of crossing some borders. There, honestly... [...] I would like to have [general] citizenship, citizenship of the world. Not to have any borders ... just a formality. So in short, citizenship it is the place where I live, and the community that I most communicate with, that's my citizenship (interview with designer at LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

Answers to questions on citizenship were often uncertain, hesitant, indicating how difficult my respondents found it to define what the term actually meant to them.

Voting rights, that's a priority of the citizens of a country, the right to private property, as well, perhaps. ... and there are other legal documents. Probably there is some difference between the rights of citizens and non-citizens (interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

In some cases, an idea of a sense of duty associated with citizenship emerged, but this was not accompanied by references to citizen *rights* and their realisation:

RESPONDENT: [It] means to be a citizen of a country. That's all.

INTERVIEWER: But what does that mean 'to be a citizen of a country'?

RESPONDENT: [*struggles*] To be interested in the future of your country, every citizen should care about this (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, age 28, 4 November 2009).

INTERVIEWER: When I say the word citizenship to you, what, what does that mean?

RESPONDENT: You know, actually, it's a difficult concept. I don't know exactly what it means. So citizenship is probably your way of understanding your status in this country. It's not only status, you belong to this country, you belong to these people, so, and you are kind of dedicated to that, or what. That's my understanding. I don't know whether it's wrong or right... (interview with Gender and Development Coordinator, age 32, International NGO, 7 July 2009).

This idea is most pronounced in the following quotation, from the director of my first case study group. For her, while she did mention rights, her emphasis was on the responsibilities of citizenship, her responsibilities towards society:

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<sup>1</sup> Kirgizia is the Russian name for Kyrgyzstan. This respondent was ethnic German.

I am a citizen of Kyrgyzstan. Yes? And here there are perhaps rights and responsibilities. [...] Well the civic position, well it should be the same for everyone. Not yes, 'give me!', but, 'what can I do?' Well, for the family, for our small organisation ... and for society (interview with the Director of a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 63, 11 December 2009).

When questioned on the link between citizenship and their activities within civil society, respondents were more inclined to *distance* their activism from citizenship, seeing it more closely aligned with their sense of humanity and community, and/or their identity as women. The respondent above went on to elaborate her view on the 'civic position' (her words), which included the idea that love for humanity should be what motivates this sense of responsibility, rather than some form of civic duty:

Well people say that we don't have any ideology, or something... But there is [human] ideology. [...] Well, to love – yourself, and the people who are close to you. [...] Well, I am not a genius, I am not that kind of person, but all the same I would like that my children will say, 'well my grandmother, my mother, she never did any harm to people', yes? In front of my family, in front of society: responsibility should be there (interview with the director of a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 63, 11 December 2009).

Another respondent stated:

RESPONDENT: Like say if I do have a passion to help women, and overall people, then I will do that. And this is because that's the way I am.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that's part of being a good citizen?

RESPONDENT: Probably yes, but the thing is that, I would probably just say, it's not necessarily to be a citizen, it's to be a human being. And to be a woman. [...] I am an activist because I am a human being and because I am a woman, and because I live in my country, and I want my people ... I want to do my best to help them if they need my help, so... That's probably how I understand that. But the word citizenship is a quite difficult term to identify and accept, at [the] moment (interview with the gender and development coordinator for an international NGO, age 32, 29 July 2009).

The last sentence of this quotation – 'But the word citizenship is a quite difficult term to identify and accept, at the moment' – along with the difficulties that people had in answering my questions on citizenship, may give some indication as to why this distinction was made by my respondents between the *status* of citizenship and being *active* in processes of social change. Citizenship did not seem to be a concept that my respondents felt able to engage with, and relate to, beyond passports and nationality, for reasons that may be linked to Kyrgyzstan's relative youth as an independent country, the declining role of the state in the lives of individuals and reduced provision of social welfare, and the far more rigid understanding of what citizenship rights and responsibilities meant under the previous, Soviet regime. As Schulte argues:

As the [Kyrgyzstani] state fails to provide even basic social and economic guarantees to the population in the face of high inflation and worsening living conditions, the structural systematic connection between citizens and the state has been almost lost. The factual

connection between the state administration and citizens takes place mostly in matters that involve paperwork (arranging a passport, pension, civil status, property issues, etc.) (Schulte 2008a, p. 6).

In 1999, Humphrey argued that the post-Soviet citizenship regime (in the specific case of provincial Russia) was 'still emerging' (p. 25). In the case of Kyrgyzstan, regardless of whether or not this process of emergence is still on-going, what now constitutes 'citizenship', for my respondents at least, is a passport, and a far less clearly defined set of expectations between the individual and the state.

Yes, there's definitely a difference. Now I have a duty to pay taxes, and to behave well, and that's all. Nobody expects anything else from me. (Project coordinator, age 37, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), talking about the difference between citizenship responsibilities today and during the Soviet period. Interview date: 9 October 2009).

What citizenship does *not* appear to be is something over which they feel a sense of control, something to be claimed and configured to enable them to realise their own rights and the rights of those they represent. For that process, other words are chosen: humanity, love, responsibility, and altruism, among others.

Taking another view, if we return to the earlier discussion in chapter 2 regarding the Soviet social contract and Soviet citizenship, it can be argued that 'citizenship' (active or otherwise) may be the wrong framework – or rather, the wrong vocabulary – to be using to look at civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan and other parts of the former Soviet Union, given how distinct Soviet citizenship was from other citizenship regimes elsewhere, with such a clearly, and rigidly defined set of rights and responsibilities on both sides (see Verdery 1996; Fodor 2002; Schulte 2008a). Indeed, accounts of citizenship that to some extent critique statist definitions of citizenship as membership of a nation state (e.g. Kabeer 2005b; Squires 1999) come up against the fact that for this group of respondents, a passport and a nationality was exactly how they *did* view their own citizenship.

## **Why do women dominate civil society in the Kyrgyz Republic?**

The dominance of women in civil society (beyond gender-focused NGOs) in Kyrgyzstan has been well documented, with the exclusion from formal politics suggested as a main reason (Plakhotnikova & Kurbanova 2008; Tiulegenov 2008; Matveeva 2007; Bauer et al. 1997). While this is a trend noted in many other contexts (see for instance the edited volume by Bernal & Grewal 2014b), my respondents' accounts as to why this was so pointed to the, as they saw it, specificity of the Kyrgyzstani context and the particular gender regime in place.

The idea that civil society in general, and the NGO sector in particular, was a feminine gendered space (and the space most suitable for making women's rights claims) emerged strongly in my research respondents' testimonies, with some respondents identifying with Hemment's characterisation of the non-governmental sphere as 'decent, moral ... and feminine' (Hemment 2004, p.227). One respondent spoke of how women's and men's motivations for professional activity were different, with women motivated by compassion, and men by money:

So women have hearts, they want to work, they want to be active in their life, they want to be productive, they want to live a productive life. That's why they go into other places where men do not want to go because there is no money! (interview with the gender and development coordinator for an international NGO, age 32, 29 July 2009).

Other explanations given invariably began with the idea that women are closer to, and more concerned with, addressing social issues.

...a woman, she is more [responsive]. She feels more, in general, everywhere, not just in Kyrgyzstan. A woman [empathises] more strongly with the problems of other women (interview with volunteer at a women's crisis centre (case study 1) and at a children's rights centre, age 35, 30 November 2009).

Another view was that the qualities of activism were inherently part of being a woman, and that women were *naturally* activists:

But women are activists, by their nature. In Kyrgyzstan, at least, here, but I think everywhere, overall (interview with the gender and development coordinator for an international NGO, age 32, 29 July 2009).

But at the same time, my respondents' accounts reflected an acute awareness of structural gender inequality and discrimination in their society, and of what other factors were pushing women into activity in civil society, rather than in other sectors:

Yeah it's just because men occupied all those business places ... and stuff, because they looked and these are the areas that they can earn money, you know... power, the government ... politics.... And the same with businesses. That's why they just occupy that and do not want ... to let any women ... in (interview with the gender and development coordinator for an international NGO, age 32, 29 July 2009).

This idea that women's predominance in civil society was the result of a combination of inherent qualities *and* the gender regime in place in Kyrgyzstan was echoed in interviews with other respondents:

INTERVIEWER: Do you think women are more suited to activism in civil society?

RESPONDENT: Well that's a question for women all over the world because it's not just in our society, this tendency ... to defend our position, address social issues, in that regard yes, women are more active. Also there is the problem that it is difficult for women to enter politics, men think it is their place, they don't need women. So for women it is their position,

so of course they are going to be more active, fighting for their rights. That's how it is in Kyrgyzstan. Especially with very important social questions, now. Social questions are of greater concern to women (interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

This respondent went on, however, to explain that gendered expectations also served to *exclude* men who might have wanted to be active in civil society from doing so:

And I think men, if they are choosing some way of activism ... and of course, it may be because they are passionate about it, but.... It's the social pressure that they have to earn money. And then sometimes they may not have a choice, they have to find [some way to] earn money. So that's why, I think, more activists are women (interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

Another respondent, who had come recently to the NGO sector and was volunteering, saw the dominance of women in civil society as resulting from the active – and visible – role that women had historically played in Kyrgyz society. As detailed in chapter 2, she pointed to the presence of a female ruler in Kyrgyz history, but also noted that in her view, because women had never veiled to cover their faces, their voices had always been heard in the wider society:

[W]ith the Kyrgyz, there was never that practice, of making women cover their faces. So because of that, well democratically and so forth, women had their voice... (interview with volunteer at a women's crisis centre (case study 1) and at a children's rights centre, age 35, 30 November 2009).

This respondent went on to argue that another reason was that women as a group had responded far more effectively to the social and economic upheavals following the collapse of the Soviet Union, again presenting a challenge to the perception of women as the 'ultimate victims' of upheavals following independence. In her argument, historical precedent blends with women's 'natural' strength (in comparison to men) in responding to crisis, and with their need to meet their own needs.

[W]hen the Soviet Union collapsed ... women again [took things into their own hands], for survival. ... well most men are usually weak, I don't know, maybe it's like that in many countries, but it's been shown that a woman, in critical situations, is stronger. Here a lot of women left work, they weren't being paid anything, they started to [do other things], and ... from these women, I can say, we have activists, they were the first to stand on their feet. [...] And these women are active, more active, as they have been in Kyrgyz history, and that's because in the post-Soviet period, women have had to be more active (interview with volunteer at a women's crisis centre (case study 1) and at a children's rights centre, age 35, 30 November 2009).

Talking about why women moved into the NGO sector in the 1990s, the director of my first case study group also held a view that combined essentialist assumptions regarding women's and men's roles with an appreciation of wider structural factors, and how these were themselves gendered:

[W]omen, it seems, are more adaptable. [...] To real life, yes. [...] But men, for the most part, are more conservative, it seems. Yes. And lots of women became unemployed (interview with the director of a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 63, 11 December 2009.)

However, she went on to argue that men's failure to grasp the purpose – and importance – of the new sector that was emerging had also enabled women to claim it as their own:

And [men] didn't notice, that it really seems that you can do something there. And so at the beginning they laughed at us, yes. It's, [well they thought that NGOs are women's work], yes? Women's department,<sup>2</sup> something like that. There was a lack of understanding (interview with the director of a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 63, 11 December 2009).

Returning to the literature, another factor in women's dominance of civil society discussed by some authors in regard to other parts of the Former Soviet Union is that the NGO sector has, since 1991, offered women opportunities for professional development and self-fulfilment that have simply been unavailable to them in other sectors of the gender-segregated economy (Hemment 2004; Heyat 2002; Shreeves 2002). Writing on Azerbaijan, Heyat notes that women are active in the business sector, but their contribution is often unacknowledged and invisible behind the male heads of family businesses (Heyat 2002). In Kazakhstan, Shreeves observes something similar in regard to commercial farming, with women's input obscured behind gendered assumptions about who farms, and who is the head of the household (Shreeves 2002). In the specific context of Kyrgyzstan, as Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova (2008) detail, the NGO sector has become an arena where it is viable – and socially acceptable – for women to build careers and to occupy positions of leadership.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, as one of my respondents explained from her own experience of working in government administration, at the time of this research, there were very few women in positions of influence in either executive or legislative organs:

[A] questionnaire was developed ... and we gave this questionnaire out among all the ministries of the Kyrgyz Republic. We just wanted to know: how many women ... overall work in your organisation ... or state administration, what positions do they hold, and of course the answers were very interesting. Women occupied these middle-ranking positions... [...] And it turned out that there were no women deputy ministers or ministers, I think. And those women [junior] ministers who were in place well they always looked after social issues, health, education. That's how it is, yes? (interview with Administrator and gender focal point, donor organisation, age 26, 10 September 2009).

As detailed in chapter 2, the director of my first case study group made the point that moving into the NGO sector had enabled her to enjoy a second career, rather than going onto her pension, as she put it. Indeed, it had enabled her to achieve a position of considerable influence, as discussed in chapter 5. Here, another respondent talked at a more immediate level of the freedom and

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<sup>2</sup> The word she used was *zhenotdel*. See chapter 2 for an explanation of the historical Zhenotdel.

<sup>3</sup> It is not the only sector where women are in the majority in Kyrgyzstan: health and education remain heavily dominated by women, at all levels below the most senior.

opportunities for career and personal development that she enjoys in her NGO role, which she compared favourably to the routine of an earlier position as a commercial artist:

[Here I am] always learning something new, thinking up something, so because of that it's interesting. Practically every day I [make a new discovery]. Then I started to learn how to use all these different programmes myself, there is a computer for me .... (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (cases study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

Another spoke of how moving to work in an NGO had meant switching career entirely, but was also enabling her to learn new professional skills, with support from her employer:

It was hard. And it's still hard, because well, being a hairdresser, that's completely different to office work, so it's very hard, even now, to understand what this work is. At the moment I am studying at the Business Academy, management, so that it will be easier for me to work here (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, age 28, 4 November 2009).

As we have seen, respondents' views on why women were over-represented in civil society varied considerably, but often combined essentialist understandings of women's and men's roles with an acute appreciation of the gendered, structural factors limiting women's opportunities in other areas. In addition, some respondents did talk of the opportunities for professional development available to them in their NGOs jobs. While this may be a factor keeping women *in* the NGO sector, my respondents' motivations for moving into the sector in the first place were far more diverse, as I will now discuss.

## What counts as 'activism'?

During interviews, I routinely asked the question 'do you see yourself as an activist?' (the answer was always yes), and 'what, for you, is activism?'. The answers to the second question varied greatly, with no fixed definition emerging.

Activism as *activity* (as opposed to *passivity*) emerges in some of the responses, along with the idea that a broad range of different activities could be counted as activism, depending on the contributions that different people and groups were willing and able to make:

Activism, that's to be active in something, hmm... Well our activism, it's promoting the interests of HIV positive people. [...] So that we can receive at the right time necessary medicines, diagnosis (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, age 28, 4 November 2009).

Well in the first place it's, as it were, not to stay ... passive in front of some problem... (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

For some respondents, their activism was a way of being that shaped how they engaged with the world:

But the most important thing for an activist, as I understand it, is to [think about her reputation]. If you are saying that we are good, we are just the same as you, [then that's how you have to behave towards others]. [...] Activism for me it is very serious, honestly speaking, very serious. Sometimes it means not sleeping, sometimes it means running from here to there, and I do that with pleasure (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 37, 9 October 2009).

At the personal level, even in personal relations ... with the community proclaim[ing] those ideas, and on the national level. On all levels. On all levels where it is possible, of course. That's what it is to be an activist (interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

Understandably, perhaps, this was particularly the case with respondents from the LGBT rights group, who saw being open about their sexuality in a society where there is little understanding or acceptance of homosexuality as itself a form of activism. One respondent described what she saw as her most significant act of activism:

I, well in my life, ... [what] I have done ... in this [regard], activism, it was that I [appeared in a live broadcast], with my face showing, and talked about being a lesbian for 40 minutes! (interview with designer at LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

This respondent went on to say that she felt that activism was something that could be 'all the time, everywhere, and without any money'. The idea that activism was something that did not (or should not) involve payment, something that was done out of choice rather than necessity/the desire for remuneration, was echoed by one of her colleagues:

But for me activism is basically doing, and working on something that you don't have to work on ... and that you're not even paid for (interview with executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

Speaking on what would happen to her organisation in the event of their losing donor funding, this respondent went on to say that 'that would be when the real activism would kick in, because right now we have salaries for all our staff members'. She also saw activism as an altruistic act, something that you undertook for the greater good rather than for your own profit, while at the same time deriving benefits in terms of maintaining your own humanity:

[Activism is something that] you have to do for the sake of, I don't know, remaining human, for the sake of achieving something, for the whole of humanity, not just for yourself. So it's not an egotistic thing. It's more like altruism, in a way. Like trying to help a bigger population, a bigger group of people, even if it doesn't bring you any direct, or indirect profit (interview with executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).



By contrast, some of the other respondents saw their activism and their work as one and the same thing:

RESPONDENT: I cannot say that I am an activist on my own; I am like the member of a team, an organisation.

INTERVIEWER: But would you say that your work is a type of activism?

RESPONDENT: Yes. I can say yes, that in Kyrgyzstan, yes it is activism. *[pause]* Because we are addressing problems, issues, which at the end of the day require [activity] and a civic position (Interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

... I already said, it's very difficult for me at the moment, in general to understand ... the structure of this organisation. That is... There are organisations that are involved in business, and there everything is clear. But here, well everything is complicated, it's really very complicated work. So because of that I [don't] really feel that I am an activist, well, I am only just starting; I am not an experienced activist (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, age 28, 4 November 2009).

This included the one respondent whose understanding of activism encompassed some of the vocabulary of international development programmes:

If we take violence against women, well then activism, it's work that you do every day. Not, 'so what are we doing today?' No, every day you work, and each time you do it better and better, and you understand the effectiveness of what you are doing, you develop some kind of indicators and you fulfil them, that's activism (interview with psychologist, women's crisis centre, age 47, 3 March 2010).

As already stated, all of the respondents were active within established organisations (either as employees or as volunteers). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that they all saw activism as something that takes place in cooperation with others:

If for example the women's movement is those who are always addressing women's issues, that is women's social issues, economic issues, political issues, yes? [...] So that person is automatically counted as an activist in the women's movement. Which means, we don't have one, or three, or five people, we are many (interview with director of a women's economic empowerment organisation in Osh, age 37, 24 February 2010).

Returning to the designer at the LGBT rights organisation, she saw collective action, and indeed, the abnegation of any sense of personal ambition or goals, as the essence of activism:

[But you have to found a movement], otherwise nothing changes. Also you need to be able to stop and stand to one side and look, find allies, and for a time, forget your personal ambitions. You have to get rid of your personal ambitions in general. Because they get in the way (interview with designer at LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

Her highly lyrical account of what constitutes activism included a description of how people are drawn to collective action:

...well it's fate, or because something happens, it's this process, some kind of magnet, it attracts people.... In short, it's a kind of process.

'Real' activism as collective action is echoed in the words of her colleague:

Actually, before 2007, I wasn't really that much of an activist, like on this, you know, collective activism side. I was more like an individual activist, sort of, you know. Blog posts, this kind of thing. Participating in some protest actions, you know. These kind of things. But only individually (interview with executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

During the interviews, the discussions on the meaning of activism that I had with these two colleagues were much longer and more involved than with any of my other respondents. The practice of their activism was clearly something that they had both thought about in some depth, possibly in discussion with each other and with other colleagues. As with other aspects of the way members of this organisation related to other gender-focused NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, this included favourable comparisons between their own activism, and that of others in the women's movement in Kyrgyzstan:

Maybe that's why a lot of women activists, that is in Kyrgyzstan ... who are already older, in their 40s .... Well they are more like managers, good managers, than activists. [...] They learn how to say the right words, and the word activism as a statement, [but] they cannot [live it] (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

For these two respondents, their activism *was* something that was lived, and that consumed a great deal of time and energy. Both spoke of it as a form of addiction:

[You] experience that high once, from when you have done something, or if you have taken part in something.... It's probably the same feeling as, you know, a pilot who takes off in an airplane for the first time, or a cosmonaut. When you have achieved something.... Maybe that's why you are high, you have that high. [...] And you can't live without that (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

And yet, they also defined activism by the way it negatively impacted on other aspects of their lives, by the 'activist burnout' that the director in particular already appeared to be experiencing:

But ... you start realising that all of your life is sort of going down because of this activism thing, you don't have time for your family, for your friends, for your partner even, for your personal hobbies... (interview with executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

At the same time, the idea of abandoning activism was difficult to imagine for her, as to do so would be to cease to live her life in a way that was meaningful.

But still, you can't really get off it. Because if you stop doing activism you stop respecting yourself, because you've sort of become like everybody else, the commercial everybody else.

[...] Like if you stopped doing activism, for me at least, it would mean that I [had broken], before the system. And, you know, decided to be like everybody else, saved my nerves, blah blah. I hope I will never do this, but, you never know (interview with executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

## Motivations for activism

Moving on from the question of what constitutes activism to what motivates it, my respondents' answers were extremely varied.

### Personal experience

As discussed above, there is some engagement in the literature with the idea of whether 'private' acts that bring about positive social change, but which are not linked to wider movements, constitute activism (see Martin et al. 2007). All my respondents were active within an organisation (either as an employee or as a volunteer), meaning that they identified themselves as activists within the framework of a formalised group or network; many also strongly identified with the idea that activism was something that took place as part of a wider movement, rather than on an individual basis. But at the same time, motivations for being active in a particular sphere were often deeply personal, making this activism individual *and* collective at the same time.

I think the fact that I am really passionate about [gender inequality], it's really bothering me, psychologically, emotionally, intellectually, and it's just forcing me to do something, at least to think about it, and try to think about ways how I can actually do something about it... I probably am an activist, because an activist is the person who really is passionate about [an issue]. And if you are passionate you will try to do something. If you don't care, you're not an activist (interview with the gender and development coordinator for an international NGO, age 32, 29 July 2009).

This commitment to working on a particular issue (be it gender inequality or something else) might be the result of individual experience, particularly for those working with a certain community, or on gender-based violence:

I want young people not to be afraid of who they are, to feel they are completely alone, like I felt at that age, like there was something wrong with me (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 37, 9 October 2009).

I was married, had family life, I experienced violence, so I can talk about it from a personal perspective (interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

Often this was linked to a sense of personal responsibility, a sense that the respondent had a duty to be speaking out or working on a particular issue because of her personal experience, and that if she (and others like her) didn't, no-one else would.

There are organisations that work on AIDS that were not started by people who are HIV positive, they can never really feel what it's like, can never really know what HIV positive people need, they can't understand what sort of medicines, what sort of foods, groceries, what kind of consultations (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, age 28, 4 November 2009).

No one else is interested, it's not important to anyone else. Only to us. So that's why we are active... (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation, age 37, 9 October 2009).

Another respondent identified a general trend in regard to women's motivation for turning to NGOs both for help, and to volunteer and work. In her words, they had 'had enough':

So and then there are many examples where NGOs, women working there have themselves [come to harm].... I've already said, the most [needy], the weakest, it's women, children, old people. And who, most of all, have been ignored, harmed. And so you have that reaction, of self-defence. And so that's why they have gone to NGOs. [...] It's those women who have really [had enough], [who've been through so much], or maybe something's just come to a head inside, that they want to help other people (interview with volunteer at a women's crisis centre (case study 1)) and at a children's rights centre, age 35, 30 November 2009).

### **A sense of belonging**

The last quotation above also hints at the idea that for some of my respondents, being active in an NGO was important for their own sense of belonging, and even, of survival. This respondent had suffered for many years in an abusive relationship, and had originally sought help from the crisis centre, before going on to become a volunteer there. Becoming an activist had provided her with a sense of purpose and a way of helping other women in a similar position, *and* it had enabled her to make friends and build up a support network.

And so at the moment I have a lot to not complain about. [Whatever has happened.] I am now working on defending rights, very interesting activities, I have masses of friends in that group... (interview with volunteer at a women's crisis centre (case study 1) and at a children's rights centre, age 35, 30 November 2009).

For some of the activists involved with the LGBT rights organisation, this sense that activity within (and membership) of the group was an important source of support was particularly pronounced. As I observed during the time that I spent with the group, and as has been documented elsewhere in regard to other LGBT groups (Nadine M. 2009; Curzi 2009), the group – and its premises – provided an important source of support and a 'safe space' for staff, volunteers, and members.

I am a part of [the group], I guess. If I wasn't a part of [it] I would perhaps be all on my own! I am a part of my friends, who love me and accept me as I am. And so [because of that I can stay as I am] (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

In this case, coming to the group's premises and being part of its activities enabled this respondent to 'stay as I am'; it gave her the strength to resist the pressures that she felt to conform to the dominant societal norms regarding acceptable gendered behaviour.

### **Political commitment**

For several of my respondents, commitment to a cause or a principle had been a significant motivating factor in their activism from the beginning. For this respondent, this was commitment to LGBT rights:

But before [this group], wherever I was working, I was part of the LGBT movement; for 18 years. [...] For a long time it was forbidden, totally closed, during the Soviet period. And after that we began to organise, we set up a small initiative group... (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 37, 9 October 2009).

Surprisingly, very few of my respondents directly articulated a commitment to women's rights and/or realising gender equality as a prime factor motivating their activism, or as part of their definition of activism (although, the fact that they *were* committed to gender equality was evident from other parts of our conversations). This respondent was one exception:

It is that position where you can actively defend ideas that ultimately can help our nation, the situation of women in our society ... on every level.... That's what it means to be an activist (interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

Choosing to work for an NGO as part of a commitment to the principle of working for the greater social good – and of not working for profit – has been documented in regard to those active in civil society in general (Chandhoke 2007) and in the former Soviet Union in particular (Hemment 2004; Hemment 2007; Giffen et al. 2005). Giffen et al. (2005) write of how the 'ideas and debates of civil society' (p. 23) were very enthusiastically received in Central Asia, while for the women active in a small, provincial feminist organisation in Russia interviewed by Hemment (2007), the capacity to play some small role in influencing the development of Russian society was a strong factor in their activism. There is some sense of this in the words of the executive director of the LGBT rights group:

It was exactly when I was finishing my degree ... and that was also the time when I was deciding 'no longer will I work just for money'. [...] I decided I would work for ideas, not for money (interview with executive director, LGBT rights organisation, age 25, 9 December 2009).

### **Desire to help others**

In their portrait of the typical NGO leader in Kyrgyzstan, Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova (2008) note that by the mid-2000s, personal satisfaction was emerging as the main reason why women were choosing to stay in the NGO sector, given that by then, salaries in NGOs were typically lower than

those that could be earned in professional positions in other sectors. In my interviews, satisfaction from helping others also emerged as a strong motivating factor for respondents to remain in the NGO sector, particular in cases where they could see their own trajectory from a position of receiving help to a position of being able to give it. This was a process also identified by Kay (2005) in her work with women's organisations in provincial Russia, where she found that some of her respondents reported the sense of empowerment that they felt from moving from being helped themselves, to providing similar support to others. The designer at my third case study spoke of her own transition from being the one in need to being able to meet the needs of others:

Be calm, find some place where she is safe, then she can start thinking about changing her life. [...] [I have been through those stages]. I was [at one time] without work, without money, without anything..... Maybe I was bitter, I was, for whatever reason, afraid, I had no faith in tomorrow (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

The respondent who was working as a volunteer at my first case study group articulated a similar position:

And NGOs, and I can say assuredly, that most of the women working there are not those who are [egotistical], they are altruists. That is, they want to help. They even want to give their time. I for instance, just out of gratitude, have been going as a volunteer for almost four months, with no salary ... I have been going just because I am grateful to those women who have helped me. And step-by-step I have come to realise that I can ... help too (interview with volunteer at a women's crisis centre (case study 1) and at a children's rights centre, age 35, 30 November 2009).

### **'Self-realisation'**

Most important is my own self-realisation. That I have to realise myself in this life (interview with volunteer at a women's crisis centre (case study 1) and at a children's rights centre, age 35, 30 November 2009).

This respondent was not the only one who spoke of her activity in the NGO sector in terms of 'self-realisation'. In many of the interviews, the way respondents talked about their work indicated an almost redemptive quality, as if their lives would have taken a far more desperate trajectory had they not found (or been found by) the organisation for which they now worked.

Well [when I first] started working here, the person ... who organised all of this suggested to me [that I should be involved in this]. But at that moment, perhaps I didn't understand why I needed this, what it was, how. At that moment, well, I was pregnant, I was on my own ... I have two children, and I just didn't have a way out. I needed to feed my children (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, age 28, 4 November 2009).

Some inner strength has appeared in me. I have already started to look at other things that I wasn't interested in before, because I was... well closed (interview with designer at LGBT rights organisation, age 29, 12 October 2009).

Finally, another respondent linked the idea of 'self-realisation' directly to the sense of control and freedom that she felt:

Of course, people have suggested that I should work for the state, but for some reason, working for an NGO is closer to me. Because I don't lose my freedom, I don't lose my [voice], I don't lose my ... activeness.... I, at the moment, I have more opportunities, for example, to take part in different events, meetings. And self-development is very good (interview, director of a women's empowerment organisation based in Osh, age 37, 24 February 2010).

The authors mentioned at the beginning of this section all talk of the transformative impact of an action on a given set of social relations as being one of the elements that marks out activism from other forms of social activity (Martin et al. 2007; Pattie et al. 2003; Genz 2006). Many of the different factors motivating their activism and decision to work in the NGO sector that respondents discussed included a desire to challenge unequal power relations in one way or another, even if this was not explicitly expressed. Talk of standing up for women and children who are in danger of harm, creating safe spaces for people who are marginalised and excluded, and confronting gender-based violence and discrimination from a position of personal experience and knowledge all point to an awareness of the role of gender and other social factors in shaping unequal power relations. But did this translate into a consciously *feminist* viewpoint?

## **So, would you call yourself a feminist?**

Much of the literature that I read on feminism in post-socialist countries prior to beginning fieldwork led me to the assumption that any identification with the label 'feminist' would be roundly rejected by my research respondents, despite the fact that they were working for or active in gender-focused organisations. Writing on the post-socialist Balkans, Sharp states bluntly that feminism is an identity that is rejected across the region (Sharp 1996), while Salmenniemi, writing on Russia, talks of it as being seen as a 'stigmatised' identity, a danger to the family and to order (Salmenniemi 2008). Also in Russia, Kay (2005) writes of how many of the women active in self-help groups in the mid-1990s who she interviewed spoke of their '... aversion to any attempt to impose a single ideology as the universal solution for all women, something they found painfully reminiscent of Soviet adherence to the party line' (pp. 110-111). In a more recent text on Central Asia, which I read after my fieldwork, Tlostanova (2010) argues that 'gender activists' in Central Asia reject the label feminist both as

Muslims,<sup>4</sup> and because in the USSR, feminism had been branded as a harmful, bourgeois influence as early as the 1920s. Reflecting the apparent demonisation of the term, Moldosheva (2007) explains how many local activists and groups in Kyrgyzstan are fearful of identifying themselves, or of being identified as, feminist, even when their activities have clearly feminist aims. In addition, as discussed in chapter 4, for the most part my respondents had been introduced to ideas of 'gender equality and women's rights' through the technocratic, neutral language of the development agencies funding and supporting their work, rather than through exposure to self-defined, grassroots feminist activism or through reading (Western) feminist theory. Again, I assumed that this would further reduce the likelihood of respondents self-identifying as feminist.

For these reasons, I had originally planned not to include any direct questions on feminism in my interviews. But as my first in-depth interview (with the gender and development coordinator of an international organisation) drew to a close, I found I could not resist the urge to put the question 'are you a feminist?' to this articulate, thoughtful woman who appeared to have so much considered insight into gender inequality in Kyrgyzstan:

INTERVIEWER: OK, my last question. Would call yourself a feminist?

RESPONDENT: Uh-uh, no, I am not a feminist. I am not a feminist (interview with Gender and Development Coordinator, age 32, International NGO, 7 July 2009).

She went on to explain that her rejection of the label feminist was linked to the teachings of her strong (Christian) faith.<sup>5</sup>

You know what, I am a believer, and I believe... I'm not Muslim, so... And God says that you have to respect your husband, and I do respect my husband. [...] And I will respect my parents, I will respect my parents-in-law. So... I am not a feminist.

The conversation paused, and I assumed that that was all she had to say on the subject. But she went on to reveal a very distinct understanding of what feminism is, one that fitted the idea identified by Moldosheva (2007) and Salmenniemi (2008) of feminism as something threatening:

Although maybe I don't understand fully the concept of feminism. I understand a feminist is someone who is just saying that all men are absolutely worthless, stupid, just fuck them off, you know, just you, you are women, you are strong, rah! Wah-wah-wah! Like that. You know, that's my understanding of feminism. [...] And I don't think I am a feminist. Because I want to respect my husband, I want to respect men for the way they are. I don't want to humiliate them, or press them down, or say 'you're stupid, worthless', blah blah blah.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Muslim gender activists reject feminism' (Tlostanova 2010, p. 46). Given that there are many different ways of being a Muslim, many different ways of being a 'gender activist', and many different ways of being a feminist, this seems to be rather a broad statement.

<sup>5</sup> This respondent was ethnic Kyrgyz.



Her understanding of feminism was as something negative, an ideology that sought to humiliate men, something with which she did not, and could not empathise. But at the same time, she questioned this understanding; she was not sure if her reading of feminism was 'right':

RESPONDENT: But I don't know what is feminism, exactly! *[laughs]* What it means!

INTERVIEWER: Well... I think there are lots of different ways of being a feminist.

RESPONDENT: Yeah... But maybe partially I am a feminist! Because I think that women should fight for a better life. [...] Maybe if that's a concept of feminism, yes I am a feminist, maybe in some way.

This exchange fascinated me. Perhaps lulled by the security of anonymity and prompted by the discussion we had had earlier on in the interview, the mention of this one word had opened up this respondent's no doubt on-going struggle to negotiate some kind of meaningful compromise between her strongly held beliefs regarding the correct organisation of gender relations with her equally strong commitment to women's rights. I resolved to ask 'that question' again, and did so in most of my remaining interviews. In each case, the answers that I received back exposed a far greater and more complex engagement with the idea of feminism than the outright rejection I had been led to expect by the literature.

One respondent, working at my third case study, did reject the term outright, on the basis of a very particular view of what it meant:

Feminists are women who want to be completely separate. No, I am not a feminist. I am a lesbian but I am not a feminist. [...] I exist, and other people have a right to exist, so for that reason I am not a feminist. [...] I have a son, how could I be a feminist? No, no. Everything's fine (interview with project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 37, 9 October 2009).

Another was happy to identify with the label, but was also clear to explain exactly what *her* feminism meant:

INTERVIEWER: Would you say you are a feminist?

RESPONDENT: Yes, that's a hard question.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, it's a hard question! *[laughs]*

RESPONDENT: If you talk about feminism as being... the promotion of women's rights, I would say that I am a feminist. [...] I am ready to be a feminist who harmoniously resolves women's issues, and not so, not so... Fierce.<sup>6</sup> Not fierce. I am not a fierce feminist. There, that's what I can say. Because some of the time, well look, the feminist movement is very fierce. Maybe that's needed as well. But why am I saying that it's fierce, because in our country, that's... well it's not needed, that kind of ferocity. Because we have a complicated situation (interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

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<sup>6</sup> The adjective that she used, 'zhestokii', can be translated in many different ways, including: fierce, severe, cruel, barbarous, horrific, violent....

In this response, the respondent gives a qualified acceptance of the term, making it clear that for her, her 'harmonious' feminism is most appropriate in the 'complicated situation' of Kyrgyzstan. But she was happy to concede that there are many different kinds of feminism:

RESPONDENT: And do you consider yourself to be a feminist?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Yes.

RESPONDENT: Great! But European feminism and Asian feminism, it, well, it's different. There are Islamic feminists!

As our discussion continued, it became clear that this respondent's participation at the 2008 Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) international forum had been an important influence in terms of her refining her understanding of feminism and feminists, and of her *claiming* her own feminism.

Yes, because when I went to that forum, well there as well... There are lots of different feminists. There are those who were out on the streets of Cape Town, and who wore these pink scarves, to defend the rights of sexual minorities. And that's one, as it were, side. And then on the other, there are those who address issues around women and war. And that's also feminism! [...] And there were Muslims there, who were [veiled], and they ... were talking about women's rights in Muslim societies. That's also feminism. So... And we are Kyrgyz feminists! (interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

For the designer at the LGBT rights group, identifying as a feminist was closely linked to her rejection of prescribed gender roles and expectations:

And, my wish is that both women and men understand, and feel, this equality. Just a feeling. *[pause]* So that [it's not a question of] a person feeling they had to do something because it's [expected], or because [they felt they had to]. [...] But when there is no difference who earns what, no difference in who [supports the household], for me feminism will have... *[laughs]*, it will be the end of feminism (interview with designer at LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

But this respondent also spoke openly about the way feminism was often perceived, as something fearful and dangerous, especially for men:

But a man surrounded by feminists, he feels that he is in danger... But it would be great if that weren't the case, and if there were men feminists. Definitely.

This idea of feminism as something harmful to men is reflected in the response of the director of my first case study group. For her, feminism represented just helping women, while she was very aware of the difficulties faced by many men in contemporary Kyrgyz society:

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that you are a feminist?

RESPONDENT: No.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

RESPONDENT: [That's a very bold] question. Open feminism, you know that here, well, I said, Lenin said, 'One step forward, two steps back'... I am for women's rights, I am proud to [stand up and say that]. But just women, and that's all? Well even if, I defend women, but men come to us as well now, that's the reality today, the economy, and everything (interview with the director of a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 63, 11 December 2009).

However, a little while later in the conversation, she spoke of how difficult it was to speak out 'against men' in her society, before reflecting:

Maybe I am doing feminist work, but... [...] Well, my understanding of feminism. [...] But not like that. We [defend women], of course, but in different ways. We have different approaches.

Again, like her colleague, the director appears to be claiming a particular *Kyrgyz* feminism (or at least, a particular *Kyrgyz* way of working for women's rights). And yet at the same time, her reluctance to describe herself, or her work, as feminist indicates the fear described by Moldosheva (2007) of being identified as feminist, perhaps particularly for someone of her influence and standing.

Finally, a couple of my respondents spoke of how their involvement in activist groups had led to a form of 'awakening' in regard to feminist political consciousness. For one respondent, the combination of her own experiences and of now working to help other women led her to reflect:

I don't want to say that because of that I became a feminist, no. [...]. But all the same, it seems that a woman, when she doesn't have any kind of ground underneath her, she is completely dependent on a man (interview with volunteer at a women's crisis centre (case study 1) and at a children's rights centre, age 35, 30 November 2009).

For the director of the LGBT group, coming to work at the organisation represented a turning point in her own, as she put it, 'feminist journey':

I wasn't a feminist from the very beginning. I mean, I was a feminist in a way, but I was like, disappointed in women in general.... [...] And then of course there was this whole insight in the whole LGBT paradigm, queer theory, feminism, radical feminism, blah, blah. [...] that's when I learned that women aren't really to be blamed, because they were just, you know, cut off from this power, from education, from access to anything. And they were actually brought up from the very moment they are born to be these, you know, stupid women, with long hair, long nails, short skirts and stuff like that. Yeah. So, I changed completely, I think (interview with executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

The label 'feminist', then, was not proved to be the great taboo that I had expected from my reading of the literature. Rather, feminism was a concept that was being accepted, rejected, and negotiated by my respondents in very different, and interesting, ways.

## Conclusion

In contrast to the anonymised, instrumentalised activist that inhabits the pages of international donor reports and theoretical accounts of activism, interviews with my respondents revealed activism to encompass a very wide range of different activities and processes, and to be a practice deeply embedded in personal experience and the desire to 'help'. While aware of their role in bringing about social change and conscious of their location within wider movements, my respondents for the most part did not profess adherence to a particular cause or ideology as something driving their activism, and where they did, this again stemmed from personal experience of discrimination and marginalisation. Nor did the idea of 'active citizenship' fit with my respondents' understanding of what they did and why they did it, with the idea of humanity – and femininity – playing a much stronger role in their accounts of what motivated them to become active in NGOs. Activism was, however, identified as something done cooperatively, as part of a wider group and/or movement.

Assumed to be inherent, feminine qualities of caring, resilience, and adaptability were also cited by my respondents as reasons why women dominate civil society in Kyrgyzstan, echoing many of the essentialist arguments linking women's roles as mothers with their roles in social activism so strongly critiqued in feminist literature. But my respondents also displayed a keen awareness of the gendered, structural factors pushing women into the NGO sector, and keeping them out of other spheres of influence, such as formal politics or business, complicating this idea of an inherent link between femininity and activism. One respondent even drew on women's historical role in pre-revolutionary Kyrgyz society, arguing that this had equipped them well to deal with the fallout of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Once in the NGO sector, satisfaction from helping others (in particular, those going through experiences with which the respondent herself was familiar), a sense of belonging and support, as well as opportunities for professional development and 'self-realisation' emerged as reasons for staying.

Finally, feminism, and the label feminist, turned out not to be concepts that were roundly rejected, as I had anticipated from my reading of the literature. Rather, it was a concept to which many of my respondents had clearly given considerable thought, and which they were negotiating and claiming in ways that made pragmatic – and emotional – sense to them.

In the next chapter, I move on to look at how my respondents' views on and experiences of being activists in gender-focused NGOs interact with the reality of working within a donor-determined framework, and with the idea of the 'activist-professional', widely critiqued in development and feminist literature.

## 7. 'Activist-professionals' in gender-focused development in Kyrgyzstan

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In this chapter, I move from considering my respondents' engagement with the idea of activism, and their motivations for being activists, to looking at how this activism sat with their 'other' identities as professionals working in the NGO sector.

The emergence of the 'activist-professional' (Alvarez 1999, p.199) has received considerable attention in critical development literature, particularly that dealing with feminist activism, with authors discussing the conflicts that these 'activist-professionals' face in trying to reconcile their two identities – activist and NGO worker. In particular, there is much mention of the way that this process has had the effect of depoliticising the activities of these activists and their groups, while the process of 'professionalisation' has produced an elite cadre of women and men who see themselves as accountable to the agendas of the donor agencies who fund them rather than to the people their groups are supposed to help.

Criticism of this 'NGO professional elite' as aloof, out of touch with 'ordinary' people, and motivated by the desire to secure on-going funding rather than to help others has been pronounced in the literature considering the development of civil society in the former Soviet Union in general, and in regard to gender-focused activism in particular. Here, I examine whether such a critique is accurate in regard to the 'activist-professionals' whom I interviewed and worked with for this research, considering in particular two pertinent aspects of this critique: that these 'activist-professionals' work to the agenda of the agencies funding them, and that they are disengaged from the people their groups are supposed to be helping. I then look at two further related issues: the possibility of service-delivery activities impacting on wider power relations, and the politicised (or not) nature of my respondents' work. First though, I briefly reflect on the role that 'activist-professionals' are now seen to play as implementers of donor programmes, and how this relates to my respondents' own conceptions of their work.

### **Activists as programme implementers**

Writing specifically on feminist and gender-focused activism, commentators such as Alvarez (1999), Hemment (2004; 2007), Kandiyoti (2007), and Ishkanian (2003) all argue that the effective co-option, or instrumentalisation, of feminist activists as implementers of donor projects leaves them and their organisations at the mercy of changes in donor policy, with very little room for manoeuvre in terms

of defining their own priorities and objectives (to borrow from the language of development programmes).

In Armenia, Ishkanian (2003) likens donor funding to a 'double-edged sword', which 'provides NGOs with funding and support, [but] also exposes them to foreign direction and control' (p.491). Schulte (2008b), writing on civil society in Kyrgyzstan, argues that the emergence of local NGOs' areas of expertise and objectives can be traced to 'the policies of international organizations and their priorities within the country' (p. 19), although concedes in another article that the attempts by prominent NGO leaders to play a role in internal political processes in Kyrgyzstan means that they cannot just be seen as having a mere 'Western' agenda (Schulte 2008a). Elsewhere, Kandiyoti (2007) argues that the reliance of gender-focused NGOs in Central Asia on donor funding and the resulting requirement to realise donor priorities has harmed the credibility of the project to promote gender equality, which has come to be seen as 'an adjunct to a neo-liberal market reform agenda' (p. 603), far detached from the lives and priorities of ordinary women in the region. Outside of the academic literature, a policy paper published by the International Crisis Group (ICG) in 2009 blames what it calls 'secular women's NGOs' in Kyrgyzstan who 'go where the money is, to projects on gender equality and domestic violence', for failure to stem rising Islamic radicalism among women in the south of the country (International Crisis Group 2009, p.24).

Questions of negotiating the identity of 'activist-professional', of the tensions between meeting needs and transforming power relations, and of who determines a group's agenda will be addressed in the next sections. Here, though, briefly I want to look specifically at this idea of activists as implementers.

As discussed in chapter 5, for my first case study group (the women's crisis centre) in particular, the prospect of losing, or not being able to secure, on-going donor funding was a source of constant concern. However, neither here nor at the other two case study groups were there any conversations that led me to believe that members of these groups saw their role as *implementing* donor projects. Rather, there was the strong sense of securing funding (often from different sources) to implement *their own* projects. For instance, at the umbrella organisation (case study 2), the chair explained how their main programme working on women's political participation was a long-term, five-year programme identifying and training would-be candidates for local and national parliaments. As she explained, the work did not stop when the funding stopped:

The work is on-going, it continues even when they do not have any funding; last year there was no money, but that's when the participants really showed their worth and enthusiasm as they started running their own activities (field notes from umbrella organisation (case study 2), 31 March 2010).

Indeed, in the shadow report to the CEDAW committee prepared by the umbrella organisation in 2008, the authors go as far as to criticise the way that reliance on short-term project funding was negatively affecting the sustainability of services for women affected by gender-based violence in Kyrgyzstan (see also United Nations 2008).

This is not to say that my respondents were not aware that what they worked on and the way they worked were influenced strongly by the rhetoric and policies of their donors, and, naturally, by what activities they could get funding for. But a sense that one's organisation's activities and objectives are influenced by an external agenda is quite different to seeing oneself as *implementing* that agenda.

### ***'Kofebreikniki'*: hostility towards the NGO 'elite' in the literature on development in the former Soviet Union**

Their social capital includes a battery of skills, including fundraising, political know-how, and lobbying. They are trained to service projects and produce the 'deliverables' (Mandel 2002, p. 287, on NGO professionals in Kazakhstan).

Not long after I had arrived in Bishkek to begin my fieldwork, an expatriate acquaintance who worked for a development agency asked me about my research. I explained that I was interested in interviewing people working for local NGOs. 'Ah, *kofebreikniki*',<sup>1</sup> he said, laughing. 'That's what they're known as here'. While he went on to make it clear that this was not a view that he shared, he explained that there was a strong, popular stereotype of NGO workers being more interested in spending their time at workshops funded by their donors, enjoying the snacks on offer during the *kofebreiki* (coffee breaks) and using the time to network with contacts, than in doing work to help their constituent groups. In other words, a career in the NGO sector was typified by the accumulation of social and cultural capital through building networks, obtaining skills and knowledge as a result of participation in training events and information-exchange fora, and the material 'perks' that accompanied such activities, such as a good lunch.

This popular hostility (or at least, distrust) of NGO professionals and their motives for remaining in the sector is echoed in the quotation from Mandel above, and appears in various forms in other studies of civil society in Central Asia and the wider former Soviet Union. For instance, Ishkanian

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<sup>1</sup> *Kofebreikniki* would translate as 'people who have coffee breaks'. Adding the suffix '-nik' (plural 'niki') to the end of a noun in Russian turns it into a trait noun.

(2003) on Armenia, Hemment (2004) on Russia, and Mandel (2002) herself all argue that the 'activist-professionals' working for NGOs that are effective in securing funding for their work are primarily elite women who moved successfully from pre-1991 positions of power and influence into the new sector, concerned for the most part with ensuring that their status and salaries were protected (see also Hemment 2007; Kay 2005; Johnson 2009). In regard to civil society in Kyrgyzstan itself, Pétric argues that NGO professionals constitute one of the new elites in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstani society: 'A new elite—or rather a reincarnation of an old one—has evolved through NGOs. They are not driven by the values of not-for-profit work or volunteerism. Rather they benefit from salaries and privileges that make them accountable to their foreign patrons' (Pétric 2005, p. 326). Similar arguments in relation to Kyrgyzstan are also put forward by Schulte (2008a), Tiulegenov (2008), Earle (2005), and Simpson (2006). Though less critical, INTRAC (2008) acknowledges that NGOs are often seen as remote and distant by 'ordinary people' (p. 4), while the Kyrgyzstan Association of Civil Society Support Centers (ACSSC) clearly saw the issue as critical enough to publish a dossier of 25 'successful' NGOs, highlighting their strong links with the communities in which they worked, and the positive impact of their activities (ACSSC 2006a).

The question of who constitutes 'the elite' is of course a contentious one, and there is also a danger in using the term of falling into the trap of assuming a homogeneity of opinion and experience among those assigned to the category 'elite'. In the specific context of Kyrgyzstan, Dave (2004) argues that language plays a role in demarcating 'the elite' here (as elsewhere in Central Asia), in that fluency in Russian remains a key marker of 'the elite, of the urban and the educated strata' (p. 121). However, she argues that to be *just* Russian speaking, with no proficiency in Kyrgyz, is now a disadvantage, while those who can converse freely in both languages and in English are in the most advantageous position.

A more comprehensive definition, used by Radnitz in his 2010 book on elite mobilisation in Kyrgyzstan leading up to the 2005 ouster of President Bakiyev, is 'those who wield power and influence on the basis of their active control of a disproportionate share of society's resources' (p. 17) (with no requirement for members of the elite to possess formal political authority), which he takes from a book by Etzioni-Halevy (1993). By this reckoning, it is conceivable that individuals active in NGOs could be considered as members of 'the elite' in Kyrgyzstan in their own right, through their access to and control over donor funding. However, Radnitz goes on to say that in his view, one 'of the four following criteria is usually sufficient to attain elite status in Central Asia: significant wealth; high state office (e.g. minister, deputy minister); position in parliament ...; or close family connections to a member of any of the first three categories' (p. 17). By this account, only those



‘activist-professionals’ who had been able to build up a significant amount of personal wealth through their NGO work (or through corruption related to their NGO work) could be classed as ‘elite’ *in their own right*, rather than through family connections. This does not seem to fit with the idea of ‘the elite’ as proposed by Hemment, Ishkanian, Pétric, Simpson, and Mandel, and of the embeddedness of NGO professionals within it, which focuses on having connections, influence over decision-making, and monopoly over access to donors and their funding, unless that idea also assumes that such NGO professionals are also linked, through family connections or because they occupy dual roles, to great wealth or formal political power.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to tell, however, as none of these authors includes a definition of who they mean by ‘elite’.

In addition, it is important to note that Radnitz does not include professionals in the NGO sector or wider ‘civil society’ in his account of elites and elite mobilisation in Kyrgyzstan, limiting his discussion of ‘civil society’ to a couple of pages. By contrast, scholars such as Pétric (2005), Schulte (2008a), Tiulegenov (2008), and Simpson (2006) who do class NGO professionals as part of the new elite in Kyrgyzstan do so from a perspective of empirical studies of civil society in Kyrgyzstan and the wider Central Asian region. However, I would argue that Radnitz’s definition remains relevant, given that it is the most comprehensive definition that I have found of who constitute ‘the elite’ in Kyrgyzstan, while the other authors mentioned do not, effectively, define who they mean by ‘the elite’ (only that NGO professionals for part of said ‘elite’). Perhaps, though, the fact that the four characteristics that Radnitz lists as defining ‘the elite’ in the Kyrgyzstani context do not adequately account for the particular social and cultural capital that NGO professionals are able to amass (and hence, make it difficult to categorise NGO professionals as members of the elite, according to Radnitz’s definition) points to a limitation of this framework for assessing elites in Kyrgyzstan.

Elsewhere, less critical work by Fioramonti (2004) and Sabatini (2002) shows that such perceptions in attitudes towards those working for NGOs are not limited to the former Soviet Union. However, Fioramonti makes the point that in the case of South Africa, the idea of a new NGO elite does not match the reality of small, local NGOs struggling to survive on erratic funding streams, and with seemingly little influence on decision-making institutions at the local or national level (Fioramonti 2004). Meanwhile, writing on civil society in Latin America, Sabatini found that many NGO professionals were well educated (often with degrees from North American or European universities) and well connected, but questions whether this necessarily makes them any less legitimate as ‘defenders of the rights of the disenfranchised’ (p. 13), as he puts it. Sabatini goes on to point out

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<sup>2</sup> There are certainly examples of overlap between political and civil society leadership, in Kyrgyzstan as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. For instance, the first woman to stand for election to the presidency in Kyrgyzstan, Toktaiym Umetalieva (who stood in 2005 and 2009), is a well-known human rights activist and the chair of the Association of Nongovernmental and Nonprofit Organizations (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2009).

that '[f]rom liberal think-tanks to welfare advocacy groups to literacy organisations in the USA, most such groups are staffed and led by people who are significantly better educated than the constituents they claim to speak for and on whose behalf they work' (p. 13), but that this is not seen as cause for concern; this is an argument that could equally be made in regard to the NGO sector in any country in the global North. It is also one made by one of Hemment's research participants in provincial Russia, who expresses her vision of civil society and its role as 'an enlightened few acting as example and inspiration for others to follow, of an elite acting in the name of the people (*narod*)' (2004, p.229).

Such an approach is countered, however, in a HIVOS policy document from 2006, which argues specifically in relation to women's rights organisations that the 'professionalisation' of such groups and a shift in focus towards advocacy work has led to a 'growing disconnect between global and national policy advocacy and local issues, local knowledge, mobilisation and organisation' (p. 13). That said, it could be argued that in regard to women's activism in particular, there has been a certain mythologisation of the 'grassroots activist' as the ideal 'direct beneficiary', and indeed implementer, of development intervention (another example, perhaps, of a 'gender myth'; see Cornwall et al. 2008). Preconceptions of 'the grassroots activist' may in turn be based on assumptions regarding poverty and material conditions, access to and control over resources, and the social makeup that do not fit with local realities, particularly in former state socialist countries, where access to education and prestigious employment was not until recently dependent on material wealth. One Russian activist interviewed by Hemment (2004) remarked, 'I have a Masters degree and I know two languages, but I live in a two-room apartment with my two sons, husband and mother-in-law and have no hot water. Am I a grassroots woman?' (p. 232). As with the term 'elite', 'grassroots' is another word that has come to be used in development in a way that assumes a common understanding of what is being described, which may not actually be the case.<sup>3</sup>

### **Were my respondents part of 'the elite'?**

From my observations of the three case study groups with whom I spent time, as well as the discussions that took place during interviews, it would be difficult for me to argue that my respondents represented members of 'the elite' as understood in Radnitz's definition, beyond, possibly, family connections to significant wealth and political influence, of which I was not aware. The precarious and erratic nature of their organisations' funding streams would have made the

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<sup>3</sup> The website for the Huairou Commission, a strategic network of grassroots women's organisations, provides the following definition: '[a] grassroots woman leader is a woman who works on issues affecting her own community. In the Huairou Commission, the term grassroots usually refers to someone from an economically marginalized community'. This definition does not really bring us any closer to answering Hemment's respondent's question. <http://www.huairou.org/grassroots-profiles> (last accessed 8 March 2013).

accumulation of significant personal wealth very difficult, and, as remarked elsewhere, NGO salaries in Kyrgyzstan have not kept pace with wages in other sectors of the economy (Plakhotnikova & Kurbanova 2008). Questioning my respondents about personal wealth would have been highly inappropriate (and would likely have jeopardised future interactions); likewise, beyond ascertaining whether the organisations that they worked for had enough money to fund their current activities, I did not see it as appropriate – or necessary – to try and find out exactly how much money they had coming in from their various funding streams. But during an informal conversation over lunch at the organisation's office one day, a passing comment made by the chair of my second case study group (the umbrella organisation) gave me the impression of a distinct lack of both personal and organisational wealth, in her case at least. Significantly, she intimated how this impacted on her (and her staff members') capacity to participate at international events and fulfil her obligations to the various international-level feminist committees and working groups on which she sat:

Over lunch [the chair] was saying how difficult it was going to be in terms of money once they are there [*New York for the 2010 Committee on the Status of Women session*]; she is part of this strategic group, that committee, and each will meet, over dinner, and she'll have to fork out \$50 a time, money that neither she nor the [organisation] has. 'But what can you do?' (field notes from umbrella organisation (case study 2), 25 February 2010).

Both the chair of my second case study and the director of my first case study spoke of links to particular members of Parliament, or government officials, and as discussed in chapter 5, the director of my first case study in particular was often called upon to give her opinion publicly on matters relating to women's rights. This had in the past been facilitated through her connection (the nature of which was not detailed) to one of the deputy prime ministers; this link had been vital during the organisation's campaign against alcohol and tobacco advertising, as it had enabled them to secure free airtime on one of the state television stations (field notes from case study 1, 15 October 2009).

However, as they both acknowledged, their links to political decision-makers and the influence that they could wield over them were precarious, dependent on tenuous personal connections, and, significantly, on whether or not gender was at that point considered an important policy issue. Given the somewhat chaotic nature of Kyrgyzstani politics and the high level of staff turnover in government departments, particularly in the period leading up to the ouster of President Bakiyev in 2010, this made maintaining channels of communication and influence difficult:

[The chair] has been trying to get through to someone in the state apparatus about getting whoever it is who is now responsible for gender to come and talk at their next meeting for ... members involved in the women in politics group about the new state apparatus. Gender has been downsized to one person, apparently, from a whole department, once upon a time.

Since the restructuring four months ago it's been impossible to get through to anyone in the administration, and if you do, finally, they can't help you because they don't know what they are doing (field notes from umbrella organisation (case study 2), 18 March 2010).

In addition, while aware of her standing as a 'gender expert', the chair of the umbrella organisation was very clear that she made a point of *not* asking for information 'as a favour', or in a personal capacity, but as an 'NGO representative':

[The chair] says that she is always firm, direct: if people won't provide information, she asks why, draws attention to the relevant freedom of information [legislation], tells them they are breaking the law. [...] Half the time she has state officials asking *her* for information on gender policy, aid effectiveness (field notes from umbrella organisation (case study 2), 18 March 2010).

As such, it would be difficult to claim that either of these two prominent NGO leaders formed part of 'the elite' as Radnitz defines it, either on grounds of significant wealth or political connections.

In regard to the possession of and access to other sources of social, cultural, and linguistic capital that Mandel (2002), Hemmet (2004; 2007), Ishkanian (2003), Pétric (2005), Fioramonti (2004), Dave (2004),<sup>4</sup> and Sabatini (2002) associate with the assumed elite status of NGO professionals, such as an overseas education, and foreign travel, the picture was more mixed. As discussed in chapter 5, one aspect that marked out the LGBT rights group was the relatively high number of fluent English speakers working in or closely associated with the organisation, all of whom had been educated at the English-medium American University of Central Asia (AUCA), and who had spent time living in the USA as exchange students. These are educational opportunities that are certainly not available to the majority of young people in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>5</sup> Speaking on this theme, the director of the organisation reflected on how the experience had been important in exposing her to different ways of thinking:

[W]e have people ... [w]ho have been exchange students in different ... programmes, like FLEX, which is a future leaders exchange programme funded by the US Department of State. [...] So we were, sort of, exposed to these other cultures. And we have been able to choose the best of the two different systems (interview with Executive Director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

However, such experiences did not reflect those of other members of staff and volunteers at the LGBT rights organisation, many of whom came from far more 'ordinary' backgrounds:

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<sup>4</sup> Dave (2004) does not write specifically on NGOs as elites, but rather on the association between speaking Russian and elite status.

<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that two of the AUCA-educated staff at the LGBT rights organisation were from other parts of the former Soviet Union.

[Well earlier I wanted to study to be an architect], and it worked out for a year and a half, I studied. But then I needed more money, and I didn't have any money (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

I finished school in 1988, I finished the 8<sup>th</sup> class.<sup>6</sup> [...] [My] uncle invited me, at that time he was the administrator at a morgue, and he invited me to go there and work, and I worked there for seven years altogether. [...] And then I gave birth to my son, and unfortunately, I did not return to work, at all. [...] ... well after that I worked wherever I could, because things were already quite difficult. [...] And then I came here as a volunteer... (interview with Project coordinator, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 37, 9 October 2009).

Indeed, the executive director argued that for her, the LGBT rights organisation's strength lay in the mix of people active in the organisation, which she compared favourably to other NGOs:

It's the mix of people, I think. Because there are a lot of NGO organisations in Kyrgyzstan who are made up ... completely ... of local people, with no international experience, of being in an international context. And being exposed to other ways of thinking, and stuff like that. And, I sort of consider these NGOs not as active.... But [here], for example we have grassroots people who have never been outside of Bishkek, or Kyrgyzstan. And we have people like ... myself, who have travelled around the world, even before coming [here] (interview with Executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

In regard to foreign travel, this emerged as a key aspect of 'doing' activism in the transnational context for many of my respondents. There is no question that the chance to travel abroad was viewed as one of the 'perks' of working for an NGO, and as recompense for the fact that salaries were often low and/or erratic.<sup>7</sup> But within both the umbrella organisation and the LGBT rights organisation, where participation at conferences, training seminars, and international-level fora abroad was a more regular feature of activities than at the crisis centre, given these groups' greater integration into transnational networks, there did seem to be a policy in place of ensuring that this perk was spread among staff and members, regardless of rank or fluency in English:

Organising for 12 women [*from member organisations, mainly rural*] to go [*to the CSW in New York*] took a long time and a lot of effort, but the chair was very glad that she did. She has taken women from the member groups before, but never on such a large scale. I said I thought it was brilliant. She said that it is so important for them to see and take part in these things. I agreed (field notes, umbrella organisation (case study 2), 18 March 2010).

At the LGBT rights organisation, participation at international events was seen as an important way of exposing those who had not had the chance to travel before to new ways of thinking; a form of 'capacity building', in development-speak. Sending non-English speakers to international events was also, for the director, a political choice that served to draw attention to issues of language, location, and access to knowledge and debate:

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<sup>6</sup> i.e., aged 14/15.

<sup>7</sup> Foreign travel meant not only the chance to see a new country, but also to save up one's per diem payments, either to spend on goods not available back in Kyrgyzstan at the end of the trip, or to take home to subsidise one's salary.

And even like if it's an English-speaking only event, we always try to negotiate with the organisers or funders so that two people would go from [our organisation], like one person who speaks English, another who doesn't. So there would still be, you know, exposure to other cultural, other means of thinking, and stuff. And it's also our policy that ... whenever we're at these conferences, we always raise the issue of why it's only English-centric, why not have translation provided into Russian (interview with Executive director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

### **And were they '*kofebreikniki*'?**

The term '*kofebreiknik*' was not used by any of my respondents, although the negative traits embodied in the term were. Perhaps not unexpectedly, this was only ever in relation to 'other' activists and 'other' NGOs (rather than used in self-reference), whose motivations for working in the NGO sector were questioned, along with the efficacy of their work and its impact. For instance, one respondent, who worked for an HIV support organisation, made the distinction between the 'real work' that she saw her organisation doing, and the activities of other groups in the HIV sector:

Basically, our organisation tries to work with other organisations that really work, and don't just have an [academic approach]. If we find out that an organisation is, well that it's doing things that aren't very good, well then we try not to work with them (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, age 28, 4 November 2009).

Overall, then, it is difficult to say with any certainty that the NGO activists who I interviewed and worked with could be classed as members of 'the elite' in Kyrgyzstan. While the leaders of the umbrella organisation (case study 2) and the crisis centre (case study 1) both enjoyed connections with people working within the government administration, these connections were tenuous, and contingent on external factors over which they had no control. I could see no evidence of any of my respondents having been able to accumulate considerable material wealth as a result of their NGO work, while other 'perks' that came along with an NGO job, principally the chance to travel abroad, were, in the case of the umbrella organisation and the LGBT rights organisation, shared around among staff and members, and seen as a way of broadening horizons and building capacity. Finally, while several of my respondents clearly came from (relatively) privileged backgrounds, this was not the case for many of their colleagues.

### **Working for free**

While all of my respondents acknowledged the support of donors, and what it had allowed them to achieve, all also believed that even if donor funding were to be completely withdrawn, their organisations would survive, in some form or another, either through voluntary activities or through securing funding from other sources. Indeed, many recounted periods when they had already worked for free, either because there had been no funds to pay them, or when they had first come to the organisation as volunteers.

Accepting to 'work for free' in the specific context of NGO work in Kyrgyzstan may in part reflect the on-going importance attached to being in work (over actually earning a living) for status and self-worth in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstani society, the legacy of the central place that work occupied in the Soviet social contract. The idea of working but not receiving payment (or receiving a salary very erratically) may have become, to a certain extent, normalised, during the uncertain years of perestroika and the sudden collapse of the command-led economy in the early 1990s; many of my respondents may have grown up witnessing their parents going to work every day, but not receiving monetary payment (or in the case of my older respondents, may have been in that position themselves). In addition, it is important to note that during periods of 'working for free', respondents would still have had access to the other, non-material benefits of working for an NGO, such as access to a computer, or the chance to take part in training events and seminars. But nevertheless, this willingness to 'work for free' does complicate the picture of venal, salary-driven 'activist-professional', as for my respondents, their motivation for activism within their chosen organisations was clearly driven by more than just the promise of a monthly salary. It also indicates an acceptance of the importance of their work and the desirability of 'doing activism' outside of the existing donor-defined, and donor-sponsored framework.

The paths will perhaps be several, but the way I see it myself, [this] is more ... of an idea than an organisation. That is so even if the organisation, well, just isn't there anymore in ten years' time, the idea itself to gather together a few people to do something together ... according to need, well I mean each person's need (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

## Whose agenda?

Funding for the 'prevailing' programme of women's movement organizations is basically determined by the influence of donors and international organizations and does not sufficiently reflect the diversity of different interests, including young people's and women's groups and communities (United Nations 2008, p. 24).

As the quotation above indicates, the perception that the agendas of gender-focused NGOs were *particularly* (in comparison to other NGOs in Kyrgyzstan) influenced by funding streams and the requirements of their donors was pronounced at the time of this research. Indeed, the dependence of gender-focused NGOs on donor funding and the influence that this had was a topic that came up in several of my interviews:

RESPONDENT: But 90%, well they are influenced by international organisations. Because they give ... grants, yes, to women's NGOs. And in fact that's the case for all NGOs in our country.

INTERVIEWER: But particularly women's organisations?

RESPONDENT: Yes, especially women's organisations, like our organisation, all our grants come from international organisations. [...] No, in general it seems for all women's NGOs, that support comes from international organisations (interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

Respondents were also realistic about how limited their activities would be, were funding to be removed, and of the fact that support and pressure from international donors and the UN had enabled the gender-focused NGOs to achieve a level of influence that would otherwise have been impossible, particularly in regard to influencing legislation and national policy:

And the law [on domestic violence] that came into existence in 2003, and well up to that year, if [we hadn't done anything], the pressure from associations, on the side of women's organisations ... from the donors' side, those who finance on gender equality issues, nobody would have done anything (interview with psychologist at a women's crisis centre, age 47, 5 March 2010).

My respondents, then, were aware of how dependent their organisations were on funding from outside of Kyrgyzstan, but to what extent did they perceive their work and its agenda as being determined by outside interests?

### **Questioning the agenda**

In her 2002 critique of the way that 'civil society' has developed (or been developed) in Central Asia, Ruth Mandel argues that in contrast to other developing countries where those working for local NGOs have adopted a more critical position 'towards some of the ideas and messages of the developers ... in Central Asia much more is taken as gospel' (p. 292). Perhaps reflecting the fact that more than ten years have elapsed since Mandel wrote this, I would argue that certainly in regard to those who took part in my research, this is an unfair judgement to make. While it was clear that they had adopted the international language of 'gender and development' – with references to 'gender equality', 'sexual rights', 'gender-based violence', and of course, the very word 'gender' – necessary to write the project proposals that would secure the funding that would enable their work to continue, this did not mean that they had done so unthinkingly, and without an awareness that this was what they were doing.

As discussed in chapter 4, on a personal level, when questioned on the matter, some of my respondents were very aware of the extent to which their understanding of gender equality issues had been shaped by their exposure to training and information material provided by international organisations. This was particularly the case for the director of my first case study group, who had been among the first generation of 'activist-professionals' to establish gender-focused NGOs:



I and another woman ... we started going to those very first trainings.... [...] The word 'gender', we hadn't heard of it, didn't know it, at all (interview with the director of a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 63, 11 December 2009).

Nevertheless, this did not mean that they were not aware of the need to adapt and manipulate the frameworks that they had been given to work with to fit the realities of working on gender issues in Kyrgyzstan:

I now better understand what is beneficial for our society, step by step. Because if at the beginning, our first projects were determined by [influences] external to Kyrgyzstan, maybe that was also beneficial, because we had to start with something. [...] But now we understand... Well gradually, I have personally come to understand that it is very important that these programmes be accepted by our society. [...] I mean we must work with our environment and our culture, while at the same time [determine our own priorities] and draw up our own progressive programme, for us. So yes, of course there have been changes (interview with consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

When I discussed with my respondents the relationships between their organisations and their donors in regard to how they shaped organisational priorities and programming, a complex picture emerged.

At the LGBT rights organisation, day-to-day relations with their main donor had been friendly, with the sense that representatives played the role of mentors to this young (in all senses) organisation. But when I discussed the matter of how decisions were made as to what activities they should be involved in and which agenda should be pursued, it was clear that the driving force for determining the organisation's work was not the main donor (or any of the organisation's other donors) and their programme priorities, but the group's members and what they felt was important.

RESPONDENT: And every year we [discuss with the general assembly of members], the future work, what activities they would like us to do. Because it sort of gives us the voice of the community. [...]

INTERVIEWER: How dependent are [you] on what donors are interested in?

RESPONDENT: Well [we] are sort of dependent, of course, but not completely. [...] So basically when we draft the strategic planning document, we don't think about donors, because that's what we want to do, and what the community needs, and stuff like that. And then we sort of fit the project proposals to the different donors that we know. [...] Yeah. So I wouldn't say they really shape us, the activities too much. They just shape the project proposals (interview with the director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

As discussed in chapter 5, at my first case study, I had been struck at how much anxiety was evident in each exchange with a donor representative that I witnessed or was a part of, out of fear that the wrong thing might be said, or the wrong impression made. And yet, in the interview that I had with one of the senior members of staff at the organisation, the picture that she painted of the

relationship between the organisation and its donors was not one-sided, a question of a straightforward implementation of donors' agendas. Rather, it was a question of exchange, and learning from each other, albeit from a shared vision of the issues:

Well the reason why they work with us in particular is because we see these [issues] in the same way as our donors, right? So of course they influence. But of course we are very grateful ... when donors understand, when they meet with us, and they understand the specifics of our society. [...] I mean for them it means a lot ... when we explain that we have such a situation. And then, in that area, when they work in our country, well they listen and that is also important (interview with a consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

### **Resisting the crisis centre model**

Dwelling for a moment on the work of the crisis centre (case study 1), as discussed in chapter 4, the crisis centre model was introduced across the former Soviet Union in the 1990s by international organisations and donors such as HIVOS as *the* response to gender-based violence. Researching women's crisis centres in Russia, Hemment (2004; 2007) and Johnson (2009) both found that women's rights activists working on gender-based violence were frustrated by the limitations of the model, and the fact that it allowed them little opportunity to address the issues that they felt were trapping women in abusive relationships: poor, overcrowded housing;<sup>8</sup> lack of economic opportunities for women; and alcohol abuse. This assessment was echoed in the words of Yakın Ertürk, former UN Rapporteur on Violence against Women at the 2012 Association of Women's Rights in Development (AWID) international forum, who argued that focusing on violence against women as a stand-alone policy issue ignores wider structural issues of social and economic inequality, and in fact serves to perpetuate wider violations of these social and economic rights (Grynspan et al. 2012).

In its shadow report to the CEDAW Committee, the umbrella organisation (case study 2) was critical of the way that reliance on project-to-project funding limited the work that could be done by gender-focused NGOs on violence against women, a view that is also expressed in a 2008 country gender assessment prepared by the UN mission to Kyrgyzstan (United Nations 2008). In our interviews and discussions, none of the staff working at the crisis centre (case study 1) directly expressed criticism of, or frustration with, the crisis centre model; the same was true of the psychologist that I interviewed, who worked at another crisis centre. Indeed, for the director, offering 'concrete assistance' to women affected by violence was for her the most important aspect of their work. However, this did not mean that they were not aware of the factors that were

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<sup>8</sup> Hemment (2007) gives examples provided by the feminist group she worked with in Tver of women who had experienced domestic violence and who had separated or divorced from their husbands being forced to remain living in the family apartment with their abusive partners, either because the apartment was jointly registered in their names (meaning that the wife would have no legal right to force the husband to leave), or because no other affordable housing was available.

contributing to the high prevalence of gender-based violence in the country and which were increasing the vulnerability of some groups of women's, such as economic marginalisation and the failure on the part of state agencies to implement existing legislation:

... the majority of women do not live very well, especially in the villages. They are under the oppression of men, economic oppression, domestic violence, they can't leave, or something like that. And it's hard (interview with the director of a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 63, 11 December 2009).

And then you understand that the law that was adopted .... About social support and domestic violence.... Gradually we, well our country, we adopted this law, and for a while we were [satisfied]. But it didn't work ... it doesn't work. And gradually you come to understand that you have to work at the level of implementation (interview with a consultant at a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 40, 29 September 2009).

One approach adopted by the organisation was to provide counselling to male perpetrators of domestic violence. In addition, in their advocacy campaigns the crisis centre was also seeking to address what they saw as the underlying issues contributing to high levels of domestic violence in particular, indicating that as an organisation, they felt that providing crisis centre services was not a wholly adequate response to gender-based violence in Kyrgyzstan. An earlier campaign raising awareness of the links between alcohol abuse and domestic violence had led to a legal ban on advertisements for alcohol (and tobacco products) on street billboards, and on the television before 10pm; staff expressed the hope that this would eventually lead to reduced rates of alcohol use among younger people, and, hence, lower rates of domestic violence (field notes, 15 October 2009). After I left the centre, another advocacy campaign was launched, lobbying for the closure of casinos and betting shops (on the grounds that gambling was also contributing to high prevalence of domestic violence, marital disharmony, and the material suffering of women and children).<sup>9</sup> These approaches may seem a little idiosyncratic, and out of keeping with feminist approaches to challenging gender-based violence, with their sense of trying to 'fix' society through 'fixing' the family, and their lack of consideration for gendered power relations and the structural factors shaping gender inequality. Nevertheless, they can be taken as representing an awareness that on its own, the crisis centre model was not enough, and that the patterns of behaviour contributing to high rates of, and tolerance for, gender-based violence needed to be addressed.

## **Links with beneficiaries and grassroots communities**

Another charge frequently levied at 'activist-professionals' in the literature is their detachment from the communities or groups that they claim to represent. As discussed in chapter 5, in regard to this

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<sup>9</sup> A law forcing the closure of all casinos was in fact passed in Kyrgyzstan in 2011 (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2011b).

issue, language emerged as a key site of engagement (or disengagement) between the three case study NGOs and the communities they served. I argued that both the crisis centre (case study 1) and the umbrella organisation (case study 2) used their status as bilingual or Kyrgyz-speaking organisations as a means of legitimising the groups in the eyes of the people they sought to represent and/or provide services to, as well as meaning that a wider range of women could access their support. Beyond that, the umbrella organisation appeared to be committed to engaging the grassroots organisations that were affiliated to it in meaningful ways, through bringing representatives of local-level organisations to regular meetings and fora where they could participate in shaping the programme, supporting them to collect data at the local level (which then fed into reports published at the national and international level), and enabling them to contribute to wider policy discussions at national and international workshops.

The nature of the crisis centre was of course very different, in that they were not a membership organisation. All the same, I was not made aware of any ways in which service users (or ex-service users) of the centre, for instance, were able to contribute to decision-making regarding the running of the organisation or its programme. Indeed, there was a clear, and clearly policed, demarcation between staff/volunteers and service users, even in cases where volunteers had previously sought assistance from the centre.

In contrast to the crisis centre and the umbrella organisation, as discussed in chapter 5, the LGBT rights organisation was effectively monolingual Russian-speaking (although all its information materials were produced in Kyrgyz as well as Russian), something that did limit engagement with certain sections of the LGBT community at times. This was perhaps ironic, given that the group was the one organisation of the three that saw itself as firmly embedded in (and representing) 'its' community, and where there was significant blurring of boundaries between employees, volunteers, and service users.<sup>10</sup> Far from being detached from 'its' community, the organisation was very much 'of' this community, although this did not mean that the representative role that it assumed did not go uncontested.

### **The LGBT rights organisation: retaining community links in the face of 'professionalisation'**

Collaboration with donor agencies led them to formalize, register and professionalize their formerly loose clubs and groups, transforming their activism in troubling ways. Now NGO professionals, they felt sharp disappointment at the third sector, at the same time as they reaped its considerable rewards (good pay, travel, professional status) (Hemment 2004, p. 231).

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<sup>10</sup> 'Service user' was not the word used by the organisation; they used 'client'.

In her work on feminist activism in Russia, Hemment (2004) identifies the process of organisations becoming detached from their constituent groups with the process of what she classes 'professionalisation'; i.e. obtaining official registration and beginning to implement donor-funded programmes. Elsewhere, Martens (2006, p. 21) defines 'professionalisation' in NGOs as the 'process whereby problems are increasingly dealt with by persons with relevant subject-specific knowledge, experience and training, rather than by staff members solely recruited for their previous political activism or engagement in the organisation' (cited in Clark & Michuki 2009, p. 330).

In conversations with the director of the LGBT rights organisation, she spoke of 'professionalisation' in terms of building the skills and capacities of the organisation's staff and volunteers, fitting with Martens' definition. I asked her if she saw this process of 'professionalisation' as potentially eroding the strong links that the LGBT rights organisation had with 'its' community.

INTERVIEWER: How do you think ... you'll manage to be able to achieve that balance between becoming professional and maintaining...

RESPONDENT: ... the grassroots...

INTERVIEWER: ... that really strong community base that you have at the moment?

RESPONDENT: Yeah. Hmm... Well I think it's going to happen through basically raising the qualification of the already existing grassroots members, who of course being grassroots staff members, being from the community would still remain, you know, in close connection with the community people. Because, you know, becoming a professional does not mean that you don't talk to your friends, you know, or to other people in the community. So as long as most of the staff remains grassroots then I think it's going to be fine to sort of keep the balance (interview with the director, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 25, 9 December 2009).

For the director, the LGBT rights organisation's status as a grassroots, community-embedded organisation was dependent on it remaining a space where boundaries between professional and social relationships were unfixed, while at the same time proving itself to be a 'professional' organisation worthy of attention and of on-going financial support. However, this process was not without its difficulties, given that 'professionalisation' would inevitably mean that some of those currently involved would in effect fall by the wayside. She had spoken about this in an earlier conversation, in terms of those who were being left behind, during this shift from informal group to professional outfit:

[The director and I] had a long chat – [the LGBT rights group] is going through what I guess you could call a process of 'professionalisation' at the moment. Suddenly in the past year they have become much more visible, lots of donors taking an interest. But of course that means conditionalities, and a turning from a group of friends into a group of employees. And that's very hard. Especially when you think that a lot of the people working there don't really have anywhere else to go (field notes, LGBT rights group (case study 3), 5 September 2009).

In the particular context of this group and its members, the process of 'professionalisation' could have consequences for the group's legitimacy as a community-rooted organisation. But it could also result in negative consequences for the wellbeing of those staff members and volunteers who were unable to 'professionalise', given the discrimination in employment towards individuals whose appearance and behaviour did not meet expected gender norms, the fact that it was difficult for transgender and non-gender-conforming people to obtain the right identity documents (again making it difficult for them to work), and the fact that most people working or volunteering at the group were often dependent upon it for emotional and practical support, in the absence of family ties.

## **The possibility of transgressive service delivery**

Another focus of the critique of the professionalization of activism in the context of donor support to NGOs has been the move towards NGOs providing social services that should be provided by the state, rather than advocating on behalf of the poor for the right *to* those services (which, it is inferred, is what 'proper' activism consists of). This comes with the underlying assumption that service delivery cannot in and of itself challenge and alter existing power relations and bring about radical change, within the neoliberal context of effectively 'outsourcing' and limiting access to services that should be accessible by right and delivered by the state.

This view seems to impose a very rigid division between activities deemed to constitute service delivery, and those deemed to be 'activist', which may be at odds with the way people carrying out those activities perceive them. As discussed in the previous chapter, for many of my respondents, 'activism' was something that took many different forms, responding both to the requirements of a given situation, and the capacities of the 'activist' concerned, rather than being defined by a particular set of activities, or a particular motivation. This is made clear in this quotation from one of the members of staff at the LGBT rights organisation:

And with us, we support any kind of initiative. Well the sports festival, two girls ... [they said] 'let's have a festival'. 'OK, let's!'. And so we found the means, how, what to organise, we... hired a stadium. And we did it. So it was the desire of the community itself. [...] Someone might want to come and prepare dinner, make something to eat, and someone else might want to work with the government! *[laughs]* Please, it's on different levels, but... Everyone has [some kind of contribution to make]. I think (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3), age 29, 12 October 2009).

In a rather different context, at a meeting with grassroots peace activists organised by an international NGO in Senegal, El-Bushra (2007) asked the participants – all of whom identified (or were identified) as activists – to list the different activities their organisations were involved in, and

which they believed fell within the scope of activism. The results represented a wide spectrum of activities at different levels: meeting survival and basic needs; peace-building and mediation at different levels; advocacy; promoting women's inclusion in decision-making and leadership; and community outreach and rebuilding. Some of these activities, such as advocacy and outreach work, are typically identified with 'activism', while basic service delivery is frequently dismissed as non-politicised, and hence falling outside the boundary of what constitutes 'activism'. And yet the women involved in this work clearly felt that *all* their activities constituted activism. Elsewhere, a representative from a national NGO in India argued that it was more sensible for NGOs to undertake service provision work initially to 'show the government how it should be done', as this would make subsequent advocacy messages far more powerful (INTRAC 2008, p.9). This represents a strategic postponement of more overtly politicised, advocacy activities, with the underlying message that earlier 'best-practice' service-delivery activities are an integral precursor to later advocacy. It also reflects a similar argument made by Whaites (1998), that service provision can include working *alongside* rather than in the place of the state, helping to strengthen state capacity to provide services in the long run, and making for more effective development interventions.

Disregarding service delivery activities in this way also ignores the personal satisfaction that activists often report from engaging in activities that have an immediate and positive impact on a recipient's wellbeing. It also ignores the fact that in the case where services are being delivered to a group who, as a result of prejudice, marginalisation, and discrimination, would otherwise not be getting them (or would actively be denied access to them), such 'service delivery' can be a very transgressive act, and one which may lead to the awakening of a radicalised consciousness in both the deliverer and the recipient. This was one of the findings of Kay (2005) in her work with women's organisations in provincial Russia in the mid-1990s. Here, women involved in organisations providing often basic support services to other women, such as emergency childcare or informal counselling, articulated their involvement in such activities as a site of empowerment<sup>11</sup> and the embodiment of their own ability to make a difference, in the face of official and popular rhetoric undermining women's right to be active in the public sphere.<sup>12</sup> As such, in refusing to retreat to the private sphere, as they were being pressured to do, and in providing services that enabled *other* women to do the same, these activists were, in Kay's view, having a far more radical and transformative impact on the lives

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<sup>11</sup> Space does not permit a full discussion of the tensions surrounding the word 'empowerment' as it has come to be used in development, and in particular, in relation to gender equality. Suffice to say that in the context of Kay's argument, I would present the following definition of empowerment as reflective of the processes that Kay is seeking to describe: 'empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability' (Kabeer 1999, p. 435).

<sup>12</sup> See chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of the 'gender backlash' across the former USSR.

of 'ordinary women', and on power relations and gendered social norms, than groups involved primarily in formal lobbying and advocacy.

None of my respondents worked for organisations that only delivered services, but many worked for organisations that combined some aspects of service delivery (such as providing emergency, safe accommodation for victims of domestic violence or LGBT youth, operating a community centre, or distributing medicines) with advocacy work (e.g. pushing for implementation of Kyrgyzstan's legislation protecting women from domestic violence and bride kidnapping, or the rights of LGBT people or those living with HIV to access healthcare) and providing sensitisation training. In these cases, these organisations were offering services and support to particular vulnerable groups that would not otherwise have been available. This was certainly the view of the director of the crisis centre (case study 1), when asked what she felt was the most important aspect of her organisation's work:

Of course, openly saying what is important ... for us, for our organisation, concrete assistance is what is important. And at the same time, we can undertake prevention campaigns, advocacy campaigns. But ... other people can undertake prevention work, advocacy campaigns... but concrete assistance... At the moment, in Bishkek, in all of Kyrgyzstan, only [our centre] offers this (interview with the director of a women's crisis centre (case study 1), age 63, 11 December 2009).

Another respondent, who worked for an organisation working with people living with HIV, felt that her organisation was in a particularly privileged position to assist others who were HIV positive, because they had a much better understanding of the issues than other groups, and, presumably, state service providers:

According to our organisation's experience, and our experience, there are organisations that have been founded by people who are not HIV positive, but they work on HIV issues. But they have probably never experienced for themselves exactly what is needed by HIV positive people (interview with administrator at a support organisation for people living with HIV, age 28, 4 November 2009).

In another example, the leader of a disabled women's organisation spoke of how witnessing the denial of material assistance to poor disabled people following independence – because donated goods were being sold off instead of distributed – spurred her into an activist role:

And then after the collapse, [well we received a lot of donations]. Humanitarian assistance<sup>13</sup> – so many groceries were brought here to Kyrgyzstan. And these people [who were working there], they were selling these groceries in the markets rather than giving them to the disabled people, so I started to fight with them (interview with the director of a disabled women's rights organisation, mid-60s, 24 March 2010).

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<sup>13</sup> In Russian, the phrase 'humanitarian assistance' (*gumanitarnaya pomoshch'*) effectively means donations of goods and money to those in need.



The personal satisfaction and visible impact of delivering a service to a person who was in need was also often evident in my respondents' reflections on their activism.

I remember when I was still working at the shelter, and I went to a disco that we had all organised together, and people came up to me and they knew my name. I didn't know who they were, and they came up to me and said, 'hi, you did so much', and I thought, 'who is this person? I don't remember her'. And it was just someone who had come and spent a night, was there, [was in a bad way] (interview with designer, LGBT rights organisation (case study 3) age 29, 12 October 2009).

I remember we were, you know, visiting this old, poor woman.... And she was lying in her bed, absolutely ... sick, and, could not move, could not make her tea, you know, or anything to eat, and ... we were doing that, we were feeding them and helping them .... So, and then at least that's something that you are doing in your life and after you die, you know you have [done] something good... (interview with Gender and Development Coordinator, age 32, International NGO, 7 July 2009).

In another context, it might be difficult to argue that the act itself of delivering services could be deemed transgressive, and I certainly do not dispute the idea that the effective outsourcing of services such as healthcare and education to NGOs has had disastrous consequences both on accessibility and coverage of services, and on the capacity of such groups to challenge poor governance. But in this case, the identification of a particular group – women affected by gender-based violence, LGBT youth, disabled women – that would otherwise have remained invisible (and even vilified) in the society in Kyrgyzstan, and the targeting of assistance to that group on the grounds of shared experience and/or a conviction that they are worthy of support and have the right to receive it, would seem to me to be a highly transgressive act.

## **De-politicisation of activism**

Literature critiquing the depoliticisation of activism (e.g. Hemment 2004; Hemment 2007; Alvarez 1999; Mandel 2002) as a result of its co-option by development agencies often fails to engage with what that previously politicised activism consisted of in the first place. It seems to assume that 'genuine' activism arises only from a conscious and articulated desire to challenge existing power structures, or adherence to a particular political or ideological cause (e.g. feminism or gay rights), something that was lacking in many of my respondents' accounts of their activism, as discussed in the previous chapter.

This approach also ignores the fact that many 'activist-professionals' themselves may not see their own work as non-politicised in this way. This was certainly the view of one of my respondents:

We carried out monitoring of [provision of services in Osh], well that's already a political question, yes? And at the same time, we are always monitoring ... inter-ethnic conflict,

originating as a result of migration. Whether we want to or not we are addressing issues of migration, at the political level, national level, and we are also addressing questions of ethnic relations. It's not just nation, it's not just women and men, it's already living in one village, maybe there are different views, and so forth. So because of that, we are already in politics. I, for instance, I already see myself in politics (interview, director of a women's empowerment organisation based in Osh, age 37, 24 February 2010).

In addition, for some of my respondents, understandings of terms such as advocacy also encompassed deeply political processes, but which were occurring at the personal level of individuals and families, rather than at the level of legislation and policies:

But advocacy, maybe that's if another person, who accepts violence, or uses it, her friends and relatives, take a different decision. And if we talk about, well maybe it's not even mediation, when everyone's interests are taken into account. Yes and if suddenly they, well not just ask for her forgiveness, but [there is] some kind of movement, they act together, in partnership, so that she does not feel that she is in danger. Then we are working well. Plus then the family starts to move towards her, people who are close to her, her [in-laws], those around, in the village, in the university where she studies, they understand, and [take her interests into account], see it from her point of view, that's very important. So ... that's what I understand by advocacy. Not us [running around] (interview with psychologist working at a women's crisis centre, aged 47, 5 March 2010).

Finally, as discussed in the previous chapter, in several cases, it was clear that respondents had experienced the emergence of a more politicised consciousness *as a result of* their involvement in their group's activities, or of reflecting on their own experiences and the support that they had received.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that while my respondents were conscious of the way donor priorities influenced what they could work on, they did not see themselves as implementers of donor programmes. In addition, the relationship between donor priorities and organisational agendas and activities was not one-sided, but seen by respondents as based on exchange, and on NGOs picking and choosing which funding to apply for, in order to be able to carry out the activities that they considered to be important. Indeed, in the case of the crisis centre (case study 1), there was evidence of some attempt to resist the crisis centre model that had been presented to them by international organisations as *the* model to address gender-based violence, and to seek to challenge some of the underlying causes (as they saw them) of high levels of gender-based violence against women in Kyrgyzstan.

In regard to their status as 'activist-professionals', respondents were aware of the negative perceptions of NGO workers in Kyrgyzstan that appear in the literature on development in this region, but perhaps understandably, chose in our interviews to project these negative traits (of

careerism, aloofness from beneficiaries, and the stereotype of the 'kofebreiknik') onto 'other' activists and 'other' groups. It also became apparent through my observations and during the interviews that, while enjoying the perks of an NGO job – the chance to travel, opportunities to participate in training and information exchange events – and acknowledging that some did come from what could be classed as privileged backgrounds, none of my respondents could be classed as 'elite' on the basis of significant personal wealth or political connections, the criteria that Radnitz uses to determine elite status in his 2010 study. In addition, in two of the case study groups, the umbrella organisation and the LGBT rights organisation, there was a clear commitment to sharing these perks around, and making sure that 'grassroots' members (or at least, non-English-speaking members, or members from smaller organisations based outside of Bishkek, in the case of the umbrella organisation) had these experiences as well. Finally, dismissal of service delivery activities, and assumptions regarding the non-politicised nature of much 'professional' activism, ignored the value that respondents themselves placed on such activities, their immediate positive (and in some cases transgressive) impact, and the fact that some of my respondents saw their work as inherently politicised.

These conclusions disrupt many of the assumptions on the side of those looking in on 'civil society' in Kyrgyzstan regarding the nature of the relationship between local NGOs and the international organisations supporting them, and regarding what keeps women (and men) active in the NGO sector. As with relations between NGOs (discussed in chapter 5), and the nature of activism and what motivates it (chapter 6), these create an assessment of civil society in Kyrgyzstan as dynamic and contested, as will be discussed in the next and final chapter.

## 8. Conclusions

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In this thesis, I have argued that the strong critiques of the artificial nature of donor-driven ‘civil society’ and of the self-interested motivations of those active within it that have emerged in the literature on Kyrgyzstan (and the wider former Soviet region) do not reflect the experiences and perspectives of civil society activists themselves. While disconnected from their understanding of citizenship and civic responsibility, my respondents’ motivations for coming to the NGO sector (and equally significantly, for remaining there) were shaped by personal experience, a commitment to challenging gender inequality and other unequal power relations, and the desire to ‘help’. They saw their work and the work of their organisations as enabled, but not determined, by donor funding, and were confident that it would continue in the event of donor withdrawal. The findings of this research also call into question the dismissal of GAD and gender mainstreaming in development programme and practice as technical, depoliticised projects. For the most part, my respondents’ exposure to the concept of gender had been through their engagement training and resources provided by international organisations and donors; this engagement had, however, equipped them with an analytical framework that they used to identify and respond to violations of women’s rights (and the rights of other disadvantaged groups) in their work.

In this regard, the sentiments expressed below by Kay, writing on women’s activism in Russia in the mid-2000s, echo my own conclusions on the time that I spent among gender-focused activists in Kyrgyzstan in 2009 and 2010.

With the scales of our own sometimes arrogant assumptions lifted from our eyes, we may discover a whole plethora of subtle factors at play, intricately woven in to multiple layers of activity, some of which may well come closer to achieving goals of ‘democratic participation’, ‘civic responsibility’ or ‘challenging gendered oppression’ than might otherwise have been imagined (Kay 2005, p.114).

These findings have important implications for the way that donors and other international development organisations engage with NGOs and NGO activists in Kyrgyzstan, as well as contributing to wider debates on citizenship, civil society, and gender as development concerns, in Central Asia and the wider former Soviet Union, and beyond.

### **The limits of ‘civil society’?**

Donors arriving in the countries of the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s had assumed that they were starting from scratch in regard to ‘building civil society’, in the interests of consolidating these countries’ democratic development. They were either ignorant of the existence of the dissident

groups, state-sanctioned unions and associations, and forms of unsanctioned social organisation that had existed across the Soviet Union, or assumed that such groupings were ideologically tainted; pre-Soviet forms of social organisation were also ignored. In turn, the 'civil society' that the donors nurtured and continue to support through sponsorship of NGOs has itself come to be seen as somehow artificial, responding to the commandments of its benefactors rather than to the needs of 'beneficiaries' or working for the good of the wider society.

In the other republics of Central Asia, this critique has gone much further, with NGOs accused of working against the state and of representing foreign, outsider interests. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, this has led to the near-total repression of 'civil society' with non-state sanctioned NGOs effectively rendered illegal, while in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, NGOs receiving money from outside the country operate under increasingly restrictive controls. In Russia itself, recent legislation forcing all NGOs in receipt of funding from outside of the country to register as 'foreign agents' or face crippling fines is serving to cement public hostility towards civil society. In all of these countries, this has significantly reduced the influence that international actors are able to have over democratic development, as well as limiting the space in which NGOs are able to operate, and the activities that they are able to undertake.

In Kyrgyzstan, the picture is more complex. Attempts by Presidents Akaev and Bakiyev to restrict the activities of civil society – seen as a source of opposition to their authority – acted as one of the factors contributing to their respective ousters. At the time, foreign funded civil society groups were identified as one of the main forces behind the uprising against Akaev in 2005, just as they had been in the so-called colour revolutions that took place in Ukraine and Georgia around the same period. As discussed in earlier chapters, the centrality of such groups to the uprising has subsequently been disputed, most forcefully by Radnitz (2010) in his theories of elite mobilisation and subversive clientalism; however, the popular association made between civil society and opposition forces remains. In regard to President Bakiyev leaving office, civil society organisations appeared to have little connection to the movements behind the events in April 2010 that led up to his removal. At least among my respondents, several of whom I was able to contact and interview following the uprising, most appeared to have been caught by surprise by the events, expressed little common cause with the demonstrators (and their methods), and were highly cynical in regard to the motives of members of the incoming interim government.

Regardless of their actual role in either of these uprisings, restrictions on NGOs were identified as one factor contributing to discontent, within a wider pattern of growing repression and impunity for corruption, indicating an association between NGOs and democracy (or at least, between NGOs and

the desired absence of repression and corruption) and the way that these groups have come to be seen as an important part of the social and political make up, in a way that has not been the case in neighbouring countries.

And yet at the same time, the same charges that they are acting in the interests of ‘outsiders’ have been made against NGOs in Kyrgyzstan as have been made elsewhere in the region, evident in the recent introduction of a draft law to the Kyrgyzstani parliament that would, like its Russian counterpart, force NGOs receiving funding from outside of the country to register as ‘foreign agents’ and potentially severely restrict their activities (Frontline Defenders 2013). Already, popular stereotypes about NGO activists centre on assumptions that they are ‘grant chasers’, more interested in securing their own careers and personal wealth than in helping their supposed beneficiaries. Should this draft law be adopted, it will be interesting to see whether it engenders the same level of public hostility towards NGOs as has been witnessed in Russia.

In contrast to both popular and scholarly assumptions that ‘civil society’ and the NGO sector are one and the same thing, among my respondents, ‘civil society’ itself was seen as something much wider and contentious – ‘all of us’, in the words of one of my respondents – than just the NGO sector, or the bounded force called upon to hold governments to account in so much development grey literature. And while my respondents’ understanding of the term went beyond the narrow confines of ‘neoliberal civil society’, it did not embrace the forms of traditional social organisation labelled as ‘communal’ or ‘already existing’ civil society in the work of Babajanian et al. (2005), Anderson (2000), and Freizer (2005), and which appear to help uphold existing hierarchies and power relations, including in regard to gender.<sup>1</sup> As such, my respondents’ accounts seemed to support critiques such as Whaites (1996) and Chandhoke (2007) that within development, the term still holds the potential to act as a space of contestation and engagement. This latter observation would, along with the apparent association in Kyrgyzstan between ‘civil society’ and (some form of) democracy outlined above, seem to point towards the desirability of neither ‘the donors’ nor those engaging with processes of development more critically to give up on the idea of ‘civil society’, both as a normative idea and as a description of an existing space.

## **Sustainability of gender-focused activism**

However, based on my research, as McMann (2004) has before me, I would question the supposition made not just by local commentators, but also by scholars of civil society in the region (see for

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<sup>1</sup> I did not specifically ask my respondents whether or not they saw institutions such as the *aksakal* courts or *ashar* voluntary labour as part of civil society, but certainly none of them offered such institutions as examples. This would be an interesting area for future research.

example Mandel 2002; Pétric 2005), that NGOs in Kyrgyzstan *are* in fact dependent on outside support. The charges of ‘grant chasing’, ‘donor dependency’, and ‘lack of sustainability’ have most vociferously been directed at gender-focused NGOs (see United Nations 2008). All of my respondents worked or volunteered for organisations that were, at the time of this research, dependent on donor funding for the bulk of their activities, and most, when questioned on the subject, recognised that the nature of their activities would need to radically change, were donor money (or the prospect of *future* donor money) to completely disappear.

And yet, behind ‘donor dependency’ I found volunteers and previously salaried staff members working without pay, attempts to diversify income sources, and strategic assessments regarding which aspects of a group’s activity are most important and why. Of course, in this research project I have only studied at very small number of NGOs in detail, and my three case study groups were all chosen for being ‘thriving’ organisations, that had managed to survive previous periods of absent or under-funding, but which had also, consistently, always eventually been able to secure *further* donor funding. Working with other organisations that were not ‘thriving’ might have revealed very different results. But for these three groups, their adaptability, both in terms of being able to respond to changing funding opportunities and to working with reduced resources, was no doubt one of the reasons *for* their ‘thriving’. But so too was the commitment of their staff, the fact that all three were providing services and support that were valued (by the women’s organisations that made up the membership of the umbrella organisation, and by the service users of the crisis centre and the LGBT rights organisation), and, I would argue, the fact that none of the activists that I spoke to from the three groups saw themselves as implementing donor programmes. Rather, they saw themselves as making strategic use of different funding sources that were available in order to implement their own, self-determined programmes. This should have important implications for the way that donor organisations engage with such ‘thriving’ NGOs in Kyrgyzstan and other contexts, seeing them not merely as implementing ‘partners’, but as autonomous entities with their own agenda and priorities.

Such findings raise important questions regarding the assumed lack of sustainability of gender-focused NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, and in other national contexts that have seen NGOs flourish in a climate of relatively few state restrictions on their activities combined with large amounts of donor money coming in from outside. But they also question the assumption that sustainability in regard to organising around gender equality and women’s rights *should* consist of securing on-going funding in order to pay salaries and maintain the activities of a coherent organisation. Many of my respondents revealed a view of sustainability that encompassed NGOs surviving *in spite of*, rather

than thanks to, erratic and inconsistent funding streams from abroad, and a view of their future activism that was not necessarily linked either to paid employment, or to the activities of a recognised group. In addition, the contestations going on within 'civil society' in regard to whose voice counts, hierarchies of age, language, and access to donors, as well as the desirability or otherwise of 'unity', would indicate a vibrancy that no counting of the number of 'sustainable' groups and associations could ever capture, while admittedly appearing introspective and perhaps rather detached from 'real world' problems to those looking in.

## **Beyond 'professional activism'**

Among my research respondents, I found 'activist-professionals' whose sense of what they were doing and why was personal, complex, politicised, and at odds with the image of the bureaucratic, salary-driven '*kofebreiknik*' NGO worker that has come to dominate literature on civil society in Central Asia. As Plakhotnikova and Kurbanova (2008) have noted, salaries in the NGO sector have not kept pace with other professional sectors in Kyrgyzstan, meaning that those, like my respondents, who have remained have other motivations for doing so. For my respondents, these included personal experience and the desire to 'help' others going through similar experiences, as well as (overt or otherwise) political commitment to progressive social change. For instance, one respondent from a women's economic empowerment NGO in Osh talked of how she already saw herself as 'in politics', while those providing services to victims of violence against women or 'safe spaces' for LGBT youth saw these as challenging patriarchal power structures and pressure to conform to rigid gender roles.

Granted, my respondents' acceptance of the (now) low salaries and the erratic nature of NGO funding may have been conditioned by both the legacy of the Soviet social contract and the role that work played within that, and by the post-independence period. The central importance of 'work' as a marker of belonging, and of status, meant that in the economic turmoil following the collapse, people continued going, even though they did not get paid. But respondents also embraced the idea that money was not a strong motivating factor in the 'feminine' NGO sector, in contrast to the 'masculine' arenas of commerce and formal politics, and also felt that they could have far greater impact through being active in the NGO sector than they could in formal politics, both in terms of bringing about concrete improvements in people's lives, and in terms of influencing wider social and political institutions in favour of gender equality.



## Gendered ‘civil society’

The implications of this are both positive and negative. On the positive side, it indicates that the neoliberal (Babajanian et al. 2005) ‘civil society project’ in Kyrgyzstan has not, in fact, failed. However artificially this ‘civil society’ may have been created, for my research respondents who are active within it, it has provided a framework for them to contribute towards what they see as positive social change. While donor support to ‘civil society’ has not acted as a magic bullet to bring about democratisation, a space has been created in Kyrgyzstan where groups of ‘active citizens’ *are* able to come together to help others and to hold institutions to account, in a way that does not exist in the other Central Asian republics; this is specifically the case in regard to gender equality and women’s rights, which do not have the same profile in other parts of the region. In regard to embedding participatory democracy (i.e. beyond voting and political representation) in the Kyrgyz Republic, this is an important achievement, albeit one that needs to take into account the barriers of location, language, and access that NGOs operating outside of Bishkek face, and questions regarding how representative NGOs are.

In addition, the NGO sector is an arena where women are able to build rewarding careers. This echoes the findings of research by Kay (2005), Hemment (2004; 2007), and Johnson (2009) on women’s civil society activism in Russia in the 1990s. Significantly, alongside the traditional feminised sectors of healthcare and education, the NGO sector has proved to be an arena where women have been able to secure positions of seniority and influence in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstani society, in contrast to the formal political sphere, and the commercial sector. This was evident in the very public profiles of the leaders of two of my case studies (the women’s crisis centre and the umbrella group), the former often invited to participate in public, televised debates not just on women’s rights, but also on wider questions of social change and cultural values; the latter approached by members of the presidential administration for advice on gender policy and aid effectiveness. In the context (over the past 20 years) of pressure on women to move out of the public sphere, in Kyrgyzstan and across the wider region, this is again significant.

On the negative side, my respondents embracing the NGO sector as ‘feminine’ points to a similar process of women’s ‘ghettoisation’ in civil society to that identified by Hemment (2004; 2007) in Russia. Drawing on Bernal and Grewal’s analysis, it points to the idea of the non-governmental sector having come to be seen as the natural arena for women’s rights claims, precisely because it falls outside of the ‘masculine’ domain of formal politics, ‘official and unofficial ... state-linked, yet nonstate’ (Bernal & Grewal 2014a, p.9), a process which has been actively supported by donors (Hemment 2007). As such, any ‘political’ power that women many claim to have there remains

precarious (see also El-Bushra 2007). The leaders of my two case study groups who did enjoy a high public profile both acknowledged the contingency of these positions of influence, and how reliant they were on personal connections that were vulnerable in Kyrgyzstan's on-going political volatility. Indeed, while claiming their own activism as politicised, many of my respondents pointed to the lack of women (and the lack of women's influence) in formal political structures as a matter of concern, with at least one already planning to make the move from the NGO sector into formal politics (despite her misgivings about what influence she would be able to have as an elected representative). My respondents' embracing of the NGO sector as 'their' sector points to the significant barriers that women continue to face if they wish to be elected to political office or secure high level positions in other sectors. Their arguments that the NGO sector is the most effective place for women who want to make a difference (in one way or another) may reflect the gendering of the sector and the difficulties that women face in other arenas, but they also point to considerable cynicism towards the wider political project in Kyrgyzstan, and the capacity of political institutions to benefit the wider population.

## **Meanings of citizenship**

This research has drawn heavily upon feminist and critical development studies critiques of the way that concepts such as civil society, citizenship, and civic engagement, not to mention gender equality, have been instrumentalised in neoliberal development. In this regard, what has become apparent over the course of this research is that my respondents' experiences and understanding of citizenship did not necessarily match *either* the neoliberal model of citizenship in development, *or* the models of 'active citizenship' that have emerged from its critique. It would appear that growing up in the Soviet Union had equipped my respondents with a strong, normative understanding of citizenship and the social contract that continued to influence their engagement with the concept profoundly.

For instance, some respondents recognised and embraced the new ideas of personal responsibility that the donors brought with them (rejecting the notion that the state should, or could, be taking greater responsibility for meeting social needs), but did not explicitly associate these with the idea of citizenship. For others, the impression that they desired a return to the security of the 'old' social contract with its (more) clearly defined responsibilities between the individual and the state was strong, along with a sense that their current activities in the NGO sector were in effect caretaking,

until such time as the state could reassume its responsibilities towards its citizens.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, 'active citizenship', citizenship as an active process of claiming and contesting rights, was in some ways at odds with my respondents' accounts of passports, nationality, and taxation as forming the basis of their understanding of 'citizenship'. While embracing 'activism', they did not use the vocabulary of citizenship to describe it and its motivations, but rather words such as humanity, love, altruism, shared experience, anger at injustice (in some cases), and the desire to 'help'.

These findings indicate the risk of assuming a shared understanding of the term citizenship and what it means to people, in this or any other context, a risk that is as relevant to donors hoping to promote 'active citizenship' as it is to transnational activists assuming a shared sense of global, rights-based citizenship. Among my respondents, who as NGO employees or volunteers would have been exposed to donor rhetoric on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship as they wished to promote it, no clear, shared understanding of what citizenship actually meant to them emerged, beyond references to passports and taxation. But what was certainly clear was the distance that they placed between their view of themselves as activists, and their view of themselves as citizens, potentially indicating both ambivalence towards the idea of citizenship in the face of the collapse of the (Soviet) social contract, and the failure of donors and international NGOs using the concept instrumentally to take the time to explore its meanings with their 'partners'. While this study worked with a small sample, it will nonetheless contribute towards filling the 'empirical void' identified by Kabeer (2005b, p. 1) in regard to debates around citizenship, through providing some analysis of the way that citizenship is understood and experienced in this particular post-Soviet context.

## Using gender

Turning to gender, the word itself, along with 'gender equality', 'gender-based violence', and other terms, arrived in Kyrgyzstan through the medium of technical training workshops and manuals, shorn from its roots in feminist theorising and activism. The technocratisation of gender in development (accompanied by the failure of so many development agencies to allocate sufficient funding and resources to 'gender work') has rightly received considerable critique from feminists in the sector. But with that critique has come the assumption that those exposed to this superficial, 'tick box' gender training go on to have little capacity to engage critically with gender and gender issues, or to use gender as a concept to analyse and challenge unequal power relations.

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, this sense was strongest when talking to the director of the women's crisis centre (case study 1) and the (young) administrator at an HIV support organisation; in both cases, people working on issues that the Soviet state failed to acknowledge. On the response to HIV in the late Soviet period, see Smith (1998, p. 635).

And yet, those of my respondents who were old enough to have received gender training in the mid-1990s recalled how it had provided them with a vocabulary that they could use to name power inequalities, and discriminatory and violent practices that had been unacknowledged or taken for granted. For while Soviet policy on the 'women question' had firmly established the right of women to be active and visible in the public sphere, it had done little to address gender inequality within the private sphere. Armed with this 'new' vocabulary and with legitimation in the form of Kyrgyzstan's ratification of the international legal documents relevant to gender equality and women's rights, my respondents could now describe and condemn gender-based violence, the gender division of both domestic and economic labour, sexual violence, and sexism in the political sphere and in the labour market.

In addition, as I found in our conversations, their use of such terms has not consisted merely of accepting and repeating them as given, but rather of reconfiguring and utilising them to meet their own strategic needs, and to fit the realities in which they are working. Again, this has led in some cases to a certain mismatch between what donors and activist allies based in the West may think they are supporting when they provide funding, resources, and expertise with the aim of promoting gender equality and women's rights, and what that actually looks like on the ground. An obvious example of this is the gap between the rhetoric of rights and autonomy of the crisis centre's (case study 1) main donor at the time of this research (HIVOS), and the way the centre's staff members saw their mission as helping those who were most vulnerable and 'fixing' a broken society. This could be seen as negative, on the one hand as representing the failure of donors and international activists to put in the effort to effectively understand the contexts in which they are supporting programmes, and on the other, as the failure of local groups and activists to grasp 'what they are supposed to be doing'. But to me it points again to the vibrancy and vitality of gender-focused activism in Kyrgyzstan, activism that goes far beyond the straightforward implementation of donor programmes and the repetition of donor rhetoric, and that is transformative rather than technocratic. Again, as with 'civil society', this research has shown the donor-sponsored 'gender project' has not failed in Kyrgyzstan, in that a cohort of activists see a framework of gendered power relations as relevant to (and make use of it in) their work.

Even the label 'feminist', which I had expected to be derided and rejected outright, was a term with which many of my respondents actively engaged. In some cases, they claimed their own feminism, a feminism that made sense to them and the reality in which they worked, intellectually, emotionally, and politically. In others, while rejecting the label for themselves, they could accept it being applied to their work. As Kay (2005) states in the quotation given at the beginning of this chapter, our

‘arrogant assumptions’ regarding what constitutes ‘proper’ feminist activism (for instance, advocacy over the provision of services) and a ‘proper’ feminist consciousness can mask transgressive practices that may be radically altering power relations at the individual and institutional level.

## Looking forward

For now, the international development project rolls on in Kyrgyzstan, given added impetus by the tragic events in the south of the country in 2010,<sup>3</sup> and renewed hopes that the democratic and peaceful transition of power between presidents Otunbayeva and Atambaev<sup>4</sup> in 2011 signals that Kyrgyzstan may one day truly earn the label of ‘Central Asia’s island of democracy’ (see Anderson 1999). As discussed above, whatever practical role civil society groups may or may not have had in the 2005 and 2010 uprisings, the fact that creeping restrictions on their activities functioned as one factor in rising dissatisfaction with the regimes in place indicates that NGOs and wider civil society are accepted as having a role to play in this on-going process of democratisation; current attempts to again restrict the activities of NGOs (through the proposed ‘foreign agents’ law) point to the threat that civil society appears to represent to certain vested power interests.

At the same time, the sense of alienation, powerlessness, and disenfranchisement among those who took part that helped precipitate the events of June 2010 further serves to illustrate the complexity of what constitutes citizenship and the settlement between the individual and the state in Kyrgyzstan today, as well as an ongoing lack of trust in the country’s political institutions and leaders. It also serves to show that while the neoliberal ‘civil society project’ in Kyrgyzstan has succeeded in opening up a space where groups can hold the state to account, *access* to that space remains restricted by factors including location, language, and ethnicity, the dominance of NGOs over other forms of organising, and the fact that it is not seen by the majority as a viable arena for realising rights claims. The way that the NGO sector has come to be gendered female, and the resulting precariousness of claims of influence and power that result from this gendering may account for this, although further research would be needed to determine if this is empirically the case.

In addition, Kyrgyzstan remains in need of development assistance: it is a desperately poor country, where the crumbling Soviet-era infrastructure on which it has relied for the past 20 years will soon give out, and where corruption has permeated – and brought harm – at every level of society (International Crisis Group 2011). Improvement against the indicators used to measure ‘development’ has been slow, and could easily be reversed. While a consideration of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> Almazbek Atambaev was elected president in elections held in late 2011, deemed overall to be free and fair, despite some significant irregularities recorded on polling day (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) 2011).

effectiveness of 'gender work' in Kyrgyzstan – and by extension, the effectiveness of the work carried out by gender-focused NGOs, including the groups profiled here – was never the aim of this research project, it would be remiss of me to overlook the fact that this lack of progress (or reverse progress) has been particularly marked in regard to development indicators measuring gender inequality. Again, as with the ideals of civil society (and the actual civil society space that exists in Kyrgyzstan), while gender as an organising and analytical concept is enthusiastically embraced (and used) by some NGO activists, this has not (yet) translated into wider gains in terms of realising gender equality goals.

In this context, the late 2000s wave of donor withdrawal that was so feared by some of my respondents seems to have abated, and the groups with which I was involved continue to receive financial support to carry out their activities. But based on my respondents' assertions of their commitment to their activism, and the enjoyment and satisfaction that they gained from it, I am certain that even when the money runs out, the work of the groups and activists with whom I worked will continue. The strategic aims behind the creation of 'civil society' in Kyrgyzstan, to speed up the democratic transition, may not have (yet) been realised, but the rhetorical and practical framework that *was* brought into being has allowed for the flourishing of forms of activism around gender rights that are at once personal, pragmatic, and deeply politicised.

# Appendix 1

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## List of code memos used to categorise interview data

'free' activism, volunteering	gender roles
activism/working for NGO self realisation	crisis generation
activist burnout	grassroots, community links
age and activism	hope in younger generation
age hierarchies	how activism and organisation's work contributes to wider development
altruism	how came to gender issues
awakening, turning point, journey	ideas about gender have changed
awareness international development trends	impact of organisation's work
claiming rights	inappropriate development interventions
collapse USSR	influence neo-liberalism
comparison with other Central Asian countries	inspiration from other women activists
current critical social problems	international rights framework
development and social change	intersectional discrimination
development speak	involvement of men
disdain for other activists NGOs	Kyrgyz society
donors and international organisations	language issues (Russian, Kyrgyz, English...)
duties and responsibilities	leadership
education	LGBT activism
emergence of NGO sector	links life experience current activism
feelings towards Kyrgyzstan	migration
feminism	motivation for activism
foreign influence negative	national networks
foreign influence neutral	new values
foreign influence positive	NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan, relations between NGOs
future organisation	NGOs as sites of change
future self	

NGOs in best position to help women	what the respondent does self description
organisation's activities and priorities	why working for NGO = important
organisational development	why working on women's rights = important
passive mentality	women dominant civil society
perceptions of gender inequality in Kyrgyzstan	women in politics
political situation	women's rights sector in Kyrgyzstan
position of women professionally outside NGO sector	work, career
potential of others	
relations CS private sector	
relations CS state	
relationship with the state	
religion	
research, knowledge about true situation lacking	
respondent definitions of activism	
respondent definitions of citizenship	
respondent definitions of civil society	
respondent reflections on interview	
right to decent services	
role of the state	
satisfaction from 'helping'	
sex, sexuality	
social attitudes	
social contract	
Soviet period	
state gender policies, apparatus	
state of civil society	
transnational activism, networks	
urban rural differences	
violence against women	



## Appendix 2

### Donors and international organisations in Kyrgyzstan, as of August 2009

Name	Date of arrival	Programme aims / areas of activity	Current projects	Budget
Aga Khan Development Network <sup>1</sup>	2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- development financial institutions</li> <li>- microfinance</li> <li>- rural development</li> <li>- health</li> <li>- education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- large-scale micro finance project in Osh and Naryn oblasts</li> <li>- ongoing support to the Kyrgyz Investment and Credit Bank (co-founded by AKDN)</li> <li>- pre-school provision</li> <li>- establishing and building the capacity of CBOs to initiate and manage village-level development projects</li> </ul>	
Asian Development Bank		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- poverty reduction</li> <li>- economic development</li> </ul>		
UK Department for International Development  <i>- bilateral donor</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- good governance</li> <li>- water and sanitation</li> <li>- HIV and AIDS</li> <li>-</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- mix technical assistance, programme-based support, health sector budget support</li> </ul>	GBP 7million (\$11.6million – 24.08.09)
European Bank for Reconstruction and Development		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- fostering private sector and strengthening the financial sector</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- focus on reforms in mining, banking, power and telecoms</li> </ul>	
GTZ (the German		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- technical assistance</li> <li>- sustainable economic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- vocational training</li> <li>- private sector development</li> </ul>	

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.akdn.org/kyrgyz\\_republic](http://www.akdn.org/kyrgyz_republic) (last accessed 12 August 2009).

Development Agency) <i>- bilateral donor</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>development.</li> <li>- economic stabilisation</li> <li>- acceleration of structural reforms</li> <li>- debt reduction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- food security</li> <li>- self-help initiatives in rural areas</li> <li>- environmental issues</li> </ul>	
International Finance Corporation of the World Bank <sup>2</sup>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- private sector development</li> <li>- transformation to market economy</li> <li>- agriculture, mining, tourism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- institution and capacity building through investment and technical assistance</li> <li>-</li> </ul>	
International Monetary Fund <sup>3</sup>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ongoing active support to transition to market economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- training of parliamentarians, government officials,</li> </ul>	
JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) <sup>4</sup> <i>- bilateral donor</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- poverty alleviation</li> <li>- transition to a market economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- people sent to Japan for training, experts come from Japan; technical assistance</li> </ul>	
KfW Development Bank (German) <sup>5</sup>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- private / financial sector development</li> <li>- economic development at rural community level</li> <li>- health sector</li> <li>- energy sector</li> </ul>	<i>Unclear</i>	
SIDA (Swedish International	1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- poverty alleviation</li> <li>- capacity building of government institutions as a means to</li> </ul>	<i>Unclear</i>	SEK 56,724,000

<sup>2</sup> [www.donors.kg](http://www.donors.kg) (last accessed 10 August 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Development Agency) <sup>6</sup>  - <i>bilateral donor</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- democratisation</li> <li>- gender equality</li> <li>- public health</li> </ul>		(\$8million – 24.08.09)  (Tajikistan 82,793,000)
Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan <sup>7</sup>  - <i>private foundation</i>	1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- legal reforms, education</li> <li>- Mass Media support</li> <li>- youth initiatives</li> <li>- access to public health care</li> <li>- transparency and accountability in the budget sphere</li> <li>- “East-East: partnership without borders” program</li> </ul>		\$56million <i>not clear over what period</i>
Swiss Cooperation Office <sup>8</sup>  - <i>bilateral donor; represents Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO)</i>	1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- public institutions and services</li> <li>- basic infrastructure (water and energy)</li> <li>- private sector development</li> <li>- water management and disaster risk reduction</li> <li>- health care reform</li> <li>- cross-cutting themes: gender and governance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- healthcare reform including budget support and strengthening capacity at the local level</li> <li>- integrated water resource management in the Ferghana Valley</li> <li>- strengthening of national disaster management capacities</li> <li>- rehabilitation of rural and urban water and energy infrastructure</li> <li>- supporting reforms to and implementation of business law</li> <li>- capacity building in public finance management and empowerment of civil society to hold said to account</li> </ul>	\$13-14million average per annum, 2007-2010

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; [www.sida.se](http://www.sida.se) (last accessed 23 August 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid; [www.soros.kg](http://www.soros.kg) (last accessed 15 August 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.; <http://www.swisscoop.kg/> (last accessed 23 August 2009).

The Delegation of the European Commission in the Kyrgyz Republic <sup>9</sup> <i>- bilateral donor</i>	1991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- implementation of the EU-Kyrgyzstan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA)</li> <li>- technical assistance</li> <li>- food security</li> <li>- humanitarian aid</li> </ul>	<i>Unclear</i>	<i>Link to this information did not work</i>
TIKA (Turkish International Cooperation and Development Administration) <sup>10</sup> <i>- bilateral donor</i>	1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- technical assistance</li> <li>- cooperation programmes in the fields of economy, trade, technology, culture, education and social development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- equipment and repairs to schools and other educational facilities</li> <li>- establishment of the Kyrgyz-Turkish Bone Marrow Transplantation Center and International Police Training Center</li> <li>- cultural activities</li> <li>- support to Kyrgyz specialists to participate in international conferences, workshops, and educational and work exchanges</li> </ul>	\$1.3million in 2007
UNDP <sup>11</sup>	1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- poverty reduction</li> <li>- democratic governance</li> <li>- crisis prevention and recovery</li> <li>- environment and sustainable development</li> <li>- cross-cutting theme: gender</li> </ul>	<p>'gender' work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- promotion of women in decision-making</li> <li>- promotion of women in civil service and politics</li> </ul>	n/a
WHO <sup>12</sup>	1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- improving health system management and financing</li> <li>- improving the quality, relevance and efficiency of healthcare provision</li> <li>- improving capacity of the health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Health Policy Analysis Project (supported by DfID)</li> </ul>	\$2.6million

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> [www.undp.kg](http://www.undp.kg) (last accessed 12 August 2009);

<sup>12</sup> [www.un.org.kg](http://www.un.org.kg) (last accessed 23 August 2009); 'Biennial Collaborative Agreement (BCA) between the Ministry of Health of Kyrgyzstan and the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organization 2008/2009' (available at [www.euro.who.int](http://www.euro.who.int), last accessed 15 August 2009).

		system to respond to crises		
UNIFEM <sup>13</sup>	1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- engendering national development strategies and policies,</li> <li>- securing women's land rights,</li> <li>- building capacity around CEDAW implementation and monitoring,</li> <li>- ending violence against women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- EC/UN Partnership on Gender Equality for Development and Peace</li> <li>- Gender mainstreaming in national development strategies</li> <li>- Women's land rights in Kyrgyzstan</li> <li>- the 16 Days against Gender Violence Campaign</li> </ul>	\$2million
UNFPA <sup>14</sup>	1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reproductive health</li> <li>- population and development strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- prevention of sexual and mother-to-child HIV transmission</li> <li>- capacity building of reproductive health services in line with national health reform strategy (Manas Taalimi)</li> <li>- capacity building in the collection and analysis of demographic data at the provincial and national level</li> </ul>	n/a
UNAIDS <sup>15</sup>	2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- to assist Kyrgyzstan's efforts to mount an effective and comprehensive response to HIV/AIDS</li> </ul>	<p>Recent projects (no current information):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- AIDS Prevention Programme in the Uniformed Services of the Kyrgyz Republic (2004-5)</li> <li>- Establishment of the Network of PLHIV (2006-8)</li> <li>- Support to review and update of the 2nd State Program on Prevention of AIDS in the KR (2005-7)</li> </ul>	\$39,000
IOM <sup>16</sup>	1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- border management,</li> <li>- migration policies,</li> <li>- legislation,</li> <li>- labour migration</li> <li>- counter trafficking activities in human beings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kyrgyz Passport Modernization Project</li> <li>- assistance to Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings in the Kyrgyz Republic</li> <li>- technical assistance to International Checkpoints in KG republic</li> <li>- preparing assistance to vulnerable people in the areas of Kyrgyzstan affected by natural disasters</li> <li>- combating trafficking in persons in the Kyrgyz Republic: prevention, protection and capacity building</li> </ul>	n/a

<sup>13</sup> [www.un.org.kg](http://www.un.org.kg) (last accessed 23 August 2009); 'UNIFEM at a Glance UNIFEM in Kyrgyzstan: Programmes and projects', August 2008 (available at [www.un.org.kg](http://www.un.org.kg))

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

ILO <sup>17</sup>	2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- employment creation, skills and employability for women and men</li> <li>- improving the national occupational safety and health system</li> <li>- reducing Decent Work deficits in the informal economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- boosting youth employment</li> <li>- sustainable partnerships for labour migration between Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus</li> <li>- capacity building on eliminating child labour</li> <li>- improvement of living and working conditions in the informal sector</li> <li>- improved labour administration</li> </ul>	n/a
UNICEF <sup>18</sup>	1994	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- mother and child health and nutrition</li> <li>- clean water and sanitation</li> <li>- quality basic education for all boys and girls</li> <li>- protection of children from violence and exploitation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- social policy reform</li> <li>- child protection from abuse, violence and discrimination</li> <li>- health and nutrition of mother and child</li> <li>- early childhood development</li> <li>- education</li> </ul>	\$8,562 million over 2005-10
USAID <sup>19</sup>	1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- business information and skills</li> <li>- trade and investment</li> <li>- development of the financial sector</li> <li>- fiscal reform</li> <li>- agriculture</li> <li>- water</li> <li>- energy</li> <li>- health: quality primary healthcare; maternal, child and reproductive health; infectious disease control; HIV prevention and control</li> <li>- education: basic education; national testing</li> <li>- democracy: media freedom and freedom of information;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SME development through Enterprise Development Centers</li> <li>- business and economic education project in cooperation with Kyrgyz universities</li> <li>- streamlining of commercial and land legislation to facilitate trade</li> <li>- Commercial Law project raising awareness among legal professionals and entrepreneurs</li> <li>- Economic Policy Reform project with the National Bank</li> <li>- microfinance</li> <li>- Water User Association Support Program</li> <li>- upgrading water and weather data collection and use</li> <li>- resource management and inter-regional cooperation in the energy sector</li> <li>- re-training of health practitioners in primary healthcare</li> <li>- contraceptive provision in rural areas</li> <li>- training of TB specialists</li> </ul>	

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> [www.donors.kg](http://www.donors.kg) (last accessed 10 August 2009).

		<p>strengthening democratic political parties; democratic local government and decentralisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- conflict mitigation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- targeted HIV prevention programmes</li> <li>- teacher re-training</li> <li>- media training</li> <li>- training and technical support to HRs activists</li> <li>- supports the Coalition of NGOs for Democracy and Civil Society</li> <li>- management training for local government officials</li> <li>- improvement of infrastructure, services, and citizen access to decision-making in Ferghana valley to prevent conflict</li> <li>- Participant Training Program: training to government ministers, heads of businesses, NGO leaders, and citizens committed to reform in their areas of expertise</li> <li>- Community Connections exchange programme: 60 Kyrgyz citizens each year will → US → further mutual understanding between US and KR through 'exposure to U.S. society and personal connections with Americans.'</li> <li>- Eurasia Foundation: civil society development and links business and education sectors in KR</li> </ul>	
World Bank <sup>20</sup>	1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- supports country development strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-</li> </ul>	

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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